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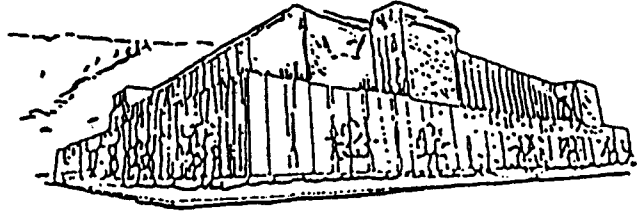
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An Alaskan Collection

by

R. Glendon Brunk

B.S. The University of Alaska, 1974

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

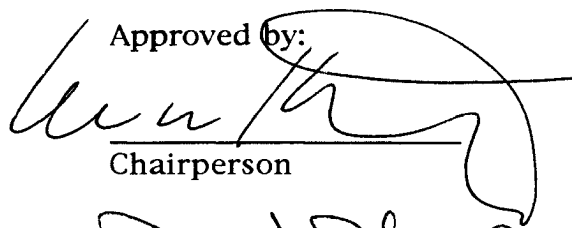
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts


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1995

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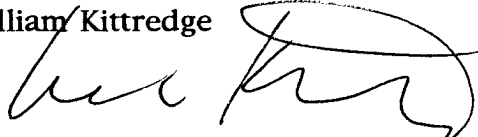
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English, Creative Writing

An Alaskan Collection (80 pp.)

Committee Chair: William Kittredge

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Kittredge', with a large, sweeping loop at the end.

A collection of four short works -- two short stories (fiction) and two essays (creative non-fiction) -- all set in Alaska.

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Stones

The kings were running when Annie first came up the river, those big, red-fleshed kings, bumping their blind way up the silty Yukon, just the way they've always come at that time of the year. I was back to being an Indian, fishing with my oldest brother, Ellis, his wheel up above the rapids. We were smoking strips to sell later, because it was too far to run whole fish up to the white man buying at the haul road bridge. We had a good camp set up in some birches on the north bank, a high point, so we could get the sun almost round the clock, and in the evenings when we were done cutting fish, we could sit up there and watch the river flow by and the light change on the hills around us. Ellis had his dogs tied along the beach, and they were getting slick from the heads and guts we cooked for them. We'd been there close to two weeks already, and we were doing all right, catching enough fish that we were kept pretty busy cutting strips, and collecting alder for the smokehouse, and cooking for the dogs.

I could feel the city leaving me, my body just beginning to shrink up hard as the booze and the bad air left it. There were times I wanted to drink, but I didn't. You may think it's just some romantic notion, but that's how it can be for me, things I carry with me like stones, and then I get back to the bush and whatever it was that was bad kind of drops off, like none of it ever mattered or existed in the first place. It was starting to turn that way for me.

There were times I thought I might even feel happy again, like when I was a kid.

Annie, goddamn Annie. Late evening, the sun just touching down yellow on the hills, Ellis' dogs began to bark and run circles on their chains. We left the cook tent where we had been playing rummy, and Ellis hollered at his dogs and they quieted quick.

We could hear a boat coming. Before long it showed round the bend below us, and right off we could see it was Billy Nicholi's boat, a big, welded aluminum outfit with a 115 Yamaha on it. Billy spent damn near a full winter up in the oil fields to pay for it. And there was a passenger with him, we couldn't tell who until she stepped out of the cabin and scrambled up to the bow.

"Hey," Ellis said, just about the same time I made her out, "that's Annie."

I could see her alright. Just as dark beautiful as the day I married her, wearing her faded Levis and a red, hooded sweatshirt. A little fuller in the hips maybe, and her face more cross from the drinking, but still when she stood up there in the bow I could feel my heart do the same jump it always did when I first saw her. She stood up there, balancing herself with the bow rope, looking impatient, giving off the feel that she might leap out long before they hit the beach. They got closer, I could see those eyes of hers flashing. I sure knew those eyes.

Billy cut the motor and glided the boat in toward the beach. Even before they touched, Annie was yelling, "Malcolm, you son-of-a-bitch!" She'd had the plane trip from Fairbanks and better than an hour on the river to get herself worked up. The instant the boat hit the beach, she was out, quick and graceful as a young girl, high-stepping it up the bank toward Ellis and me.

Ellis passed her on the way down to grab the boat and Annie ignored

him, just got right into chastising me. "Malcolm, goddamn you!" She stepped right up to me and stretched up tall as she could, eyes just working me over. "You run off and come out here fishin'. Who the hell do you think you are to walk off your job and just quit your kids? Goddamn you!" I couldn't come up with much to say back to her. Never have been able to. Just pull in and wait for her to run herself out.

Billy stepped off his boat smiling and happy to see Ellis and me. He's one of the happiest fellows I know. Could be standing barefoot up to his knees in shit and he'd be thinking how great it felt between his toes and how much money he was going to make selling it to the gardeners in Fairbanks. He's Eskimo on his father's side, from some village out on the Y-K delta, but came up here when he married Bootie Thomas down in the village. You could tell he was enjoying Annie being so worked up. But I guess he figured I'd taken enough, so before she could come down on me again, Billy said to her, "Christ, Annie, you oughta' at least let him make us some coffee before you take his head off." That calmed her some, but she kept glaring at me, it wasn't at all like she was finished.

Ellis and Billy led the way back up the bank to the wall tent where we cooked. Annie walked in front of me, agitated, planting her feet hard, raising little puffs of silt from the bank. In the tent she wouldn't sit, just paced the small space, casting impatient glances at Ellis making coffee and talking with Billy Nicholi about the price of fish. We all drank a cup with plenty of canned milk and sugar. Annie finished hers fast and put the cup down hard on the table. "I want to talk to you away from here, Malcolm." She said it like my choice in the matter was damn slim.

We left the tent and walked up through the spruce behind the camp, up to a little moss-covered knoll looking out over the river. Annie turned on me,

all anger, and with both hands pushed hard at my chest. "You fucker, you!" She pushed again. " You bastard, you just walk out and leave me! Never say nothin' to anyone. You. . ." Those eyes of hers began to fill. "You fucker you." She slumped down on the moss.

I sat beside her.

Two hawks glided high above the hills across the river, just moving silhouettes against the faded sky, riding the air currents, not a flap of their wings. Maybe it was ten-thirty or eleven in the evening, late in the day anyway for hawks to be up. I put my arms around Annie and pulled her to me. She resisted a little at first, but then came to me willingly.

We sat that way a while, my arms around her, just letting the quiet of the woods take over. Then like she had had enough quiet for one day, Annie pushed away from me. "I hate you!"

"Don't," I said. "I just couldn't keep going the way we were."

"You could have told me you were leaving."

"If I had you would have talked me out of it, you know that."

She smiled. "Maybe I would have." And then she frowned. "You don't love me anymore I guess."

"I love you," I said, giving it to her, but thinking when I said it that if it's love it should have times when it's easy, and there should be a place in it for coming to what you need for yourself without needing to fight for it so.

"Hold me" she said, and I did, and something so simple as that led to what it always led to when there seemed no way out of the confusion between us. I can't say it was love that we made. What we did was prove to each other that we were still alive, that our hearts beat strongly, that our bodies could sweat and twist and tremble, that we were as free as the hawks gliding above us for one drawn-out moment.

I can see Annie. Her long black hair falling across bare shoulders curving soft against her red sweat shirt spread over green moss. And those dark eyes of hers touching high cheekbones, breasts still nearly as firm as a young girl's, her stomach soft and full from bearing the children. All of it given in a way she gave at no other time.

When we finished, when the last passion drained from us like blood, I lay close to her on my stomach with my arm across her breasts, and listened to the sounds around us, listened to a thrush, a *gguzaakk*, fluting somewhere back in the woods. The old people would say when they heard a *gguzaakk* in the evening that a spirit lurked nearby.

Annie turned on her side, reached over and with both hands turned my face toward her. "What you gonna do, Malcolm?"

I was ready for it, as ready as I knew how to be. "I'm not coming back to town," I said. "No way am I coming back."

She was quiet a moment, considering it. I felt my stomach knot, ready for her anger. There was that old look in her eyes that I was so familiar with but could never figure, something pulling her two ways, maybe even more than two ways, and keeping her dissatisfied about everything. "What about Caroline and Paul?" she asked. "What about your kids?"

I won't lie to you, it's a fact that I pushed away from them when I pushed away from Annie, put them out of my mind the best way I knew how. It wasn't like I couldn't see how it was for them, how they were growing up wild, taking all the confusion into them like sponges, all the hard twists of Annie and me, and the cuts to them of being mixed-breed kids in a white man's town. But the truth is it was all I could do to get my own self away from that white man's town. You may not like hearing it, may think low of me, but that's the way it was. I'm not saying I don't wish it could have been different.

"You can send them back out here to the village," I said. "They need to know about something besides town."

"Damn you," she said. "They're my kids too. How come you think that goddamned village would be any better for them?"

"You know it would , Annie," I said. "You know they're alone too much when you're drinking, and town's not easy on them. They'd be better off in the village with their grandmother, you know that's a fact."

I braced for her anger, but she surprised me. She pushed herself up on one elbow and looked down at me, eyes soft almost like when she was a girl. "Maybe I can quit drinking, Malcom. You come back to town, things'll turn out better. We could start taking care of those kids of ours." She said it like at that moment she wanted it, but I knew there was no real belief behind it. I'd heard it before, not just from her but from myself.

I gave it a moment. And I surprised myself, how I didn't give in this time, how I stuck up for what I needed. I shook my head. "Things never have been better, Annie. And you know that they're not gonna be."

She just looked at me quiet, turning it over in her mind, I guess getting used to the idea of me sounding sure about something for once. She turned away from me then, her voice low. "I wish I had taken up with Silas back when we were kids, that's what I wish. I wish I had gone with him."

I can't say her saying that about Silas didn't hurt. It's not like the first time I'd heard it, though, not like I didn't know how she felt about him from the beginning. I know, too, this time her saying it didn't hurt as bad as the other times.

She stood then, naked and soft, walked to a clump of long grass growing at the edge of the clearing. She pulled a handful and came back and sat beside me again, began braiding three strands.

She concentrated on braiding the grass for a while. I watched her, watched the deftness of her fingers, the close attention on her face, her hair swinging free.

She stopped then and turned to me, her expression puzzled. "Damn it, how come he did what he did?"

"I don't know," I said, "there's no use thinkin' about it too much."

"But you do," she said. "you haven't thought of anything else since he went."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe him leavin' was what it took to finally wake me up."

Annie finished the first strand of grass and began another. Then she stopped and smiled to herself. She turned to me again. "Remember how it was when we were kids? All our families'd come out here to our fish camps and spend the whole summer. Remember it then, Malcolm? Not seeing anybody but my own family for a couple months, I'd about go crazy. Then there'd be that week or two the end of August we'd all be back in the village, before they sent us off to school. Remember the times we used to have those couple weeks?" She laughed. "God, you were shy then." Her eyes saddened. "It all seemed a hell of a lot simpler then, didn't it?" She reached for her red sweatshirt, pulled it over her head, and across her breasts to her waist. She pulled the hood back from her face. "It's not gonna be easy without you, Malcolm."

"It wasn't easy with me," I said.

She laughed. "That's a fact."

We sat quiet together then. She finished the second strand and began a third. When it was done, she took the three and braided them into one, then pulled her long black hair back and tied it with the braid of grass. She stood

and pulled on her Levis. "I'm gonna get Billy to run me on back tonight. I'll think about sendin' the kids. You son-of-a-bitch."

Sometimes in the evening instead of sitting with Ellis, I take the boat by myself and come down to the wheel. I tie upstream on a big spruce leaning out over the river, and crawl up on the low bluff above the wheel and just watch the current turn it, watch the baskets come dripping up out of the water, listen to the soft plunge as the paddles hit. I sit quiet, not letting the mosquitoes bother me, sit until a big king rolls up, flashing and fighting against the wire of the basket, turning and falling fast down the chute into the box. I sit there and listen to it die, listen to it thrash and slap against the plywood sides of the box, listen to that big king weaken and drown in the clear air. There's sorrow in its dying, sorrow mixed with the full pleasure of taking a living.

Sometimes when I sit at the wheel I hear my grandfather speaking, my father's father. Even with the old life fast disappearing around him he was still sure of the way the world worked. Once as a child I had lost a young pup I had grown fond of. A wolf came into our rat camp one spring and carried it off. I was upset, not crying because crying was not our way. But I was sad and my grandfather could see that. I can still hear his soft voice speaking to me in the old language: "There's a purpose for everything, Malcolm, even a purpose in something you care about dying."

I can see him, full head of gray hair, his face wrinkled and brown as dried caribou. He sits silent for awhile, the way elders do when they consider their speech, letting the heart lead the words to the tongue. "Yes, understanding the purpose of dying, that's a big part of what it means to be fully human."

He would also talk about respect for dying. A fish that has come

hundreds of miles upriver to die in my wheel deserves respect. Grandfather would have said, "Respect its decision to give its life to you."

I don't know about that, about decision.

There were three of us brothers: Ellis the oldest, then Silas, and last me. A couple days after Annie went back to Fairbanks, Ellis and I were at the cutting table, with our long knives turning the red flesh off in long slabs, and then cutting it in thin strips to brine and hang over the alder smoke to cure until it tastes like candy. "Ellis," I said, "you ever think about salmon coming so far up here to die?"

Ellis kept cutting, his blade slipping quickly back and forth along the backbone of a big male. "I've thought of it some," he said.

"What?"

He chuckled, "Crazy for love, I guess. It's the same damn thing that gets most of us in trouble sooner or later."

"There's no justice in it," I said.

"It ain't about justice," Ellis said. "It's just the way it is. There ain't no right or wrong in it."

"You ever miss Silas?" I asked him. It was not something I'd planned to ask Ellis, it just slipped out.

Ellis' knife stopped. He looked upriver, then took a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, lit it and took a drag. The smoke trailed from his nostrils as he spoke. "Sure I miss him," he said. "But, you know, after he left and went to work up on the slope, and then into Fairbanks instead of comin' back here, I kind of give up on him. You know how Silas was, wasn't happy unless he was raising hell of some kind. Maybe I just got tired of. . ." But Ellis didn't finish, just put the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and went back to cutting fish,

showing me in his own way that he would be silent now.

Ellis knows how to be silent. He's like most of us, not much into talking. The two of us can sit evenings, Ellis smoking cigarettes and not saying a thing for hours, except maybe to ask me if I want some tea. It's not like he doesn't know things, though. He's a good man in the bush, and he's as good with dogs as anybody on this stretch of the Yukon, works gentle with them, not hard-handed the way some do. Ellis never left the village except to go fire fighting. He never got pulled away by work up in the oil fields or took to Second Avenue the way some of us did. There's no figuring the way he's hung on and made a go of it out here. So different than Silas or me, right from the beginning.

Silas, though, he's his own story. Of anybody I've ever known, he was the most crazy for women, used to say he'd like to spawn till he died. "Just fuck till I wash right up on the shore and the ravens peck my eyes out." Before he left the village, he'd run his boat down river, damn near all the way to the delta, buy some bootleg whiskey down there, and then run upriver, stopping at every village along the way, just hoping to get laid wherever he landed. "Making a spawning run," he called it.

From the time we were kids, Silas was always the crazy one. He would take a dare when no other kid would, and run with it. Hold his head up high and laugh at danger like it was his friend. Damn him.

I turned thirty-five this spring. Ellis and I, we're survivors. Of the thirteen boys around our age that grew up together in the village, there's just a few of us left. Ellis, me, and Itchy Carlo, we're the only ones out on the river this summer. There's a couple other fellows that stayed in the village, worked at the few jobs there. All the others are gone, either dead or trying to die. I know this: if I had stayed in Fairbanks any longer I most likely would have joined the ones gone. I suppose the truth is there's still no guarantee.

The girls we grew up with, most of them have done better at staying alive. Annie was among them. Well, not really among them, more like her own self, wild and restless to leave the village as soon as she could. It would have made sense that she would have been Silas' mate; they both possessed the same recklessness. And Silas wanted her, just the way he wanted them all. It might have gone his way, except Annie decided differently. She made that clear at a big Christmas *Nuchalawaya* dance, and some of us young ones were home from the boarding schools, seeing each other after months apart. Everybody in the village was gathered in the community hall, circled around the dance floor on metal folding chairs. Clarence Charlie was scraping away on his old fiddle, T. T. Jimmie playing his Gibson guitar. And Silas, a year older than me, just out of high school, was drinking, and the old people there were feeling shame for him, uncomfortable with his disregard for the occasion. Silas was handsome as an Indian can get, tall for an Athabaskan, hair slicked back and wearing a new black ski jacket and a dark green down-river hat. He stepped up to Annie, sitting with some other girls. Loud, so everybody could hear him, he said, "You gonna be my woman."

And Annie, not shy or scared or anything. "I'll be goddamned if I am, Silas."

"Okay," Silas smiled, "just for tonight then."

Annie laughed. "You mind your own business, Silas. Not tonight or any night. I'm taken." Nobody knew at the time who she was taken by, not even me.

Silas just kept smiling and moved on down the line. His was an easy way. He always was drawn to Annie, but if she had other ideas, then life was too short to spend any time trying to change her mind. There were always others who took less convincing.

I've heard some say there can be no regrets, life just takes you where it does and there's reasons for it. But in my mind there's regrets.

My mother, she's Indian on her mother's side and Norwegian on her father's. Her father was a whaler who jumped ship up on the Arctic Ocean and worked his way through the bush to my mother's village up on the Koyukuk. My old man - he was a good bit older than my mother - met her up there on the Koyukuk during a potlatch, and months later returned and asked her to come down and live with him on the Yukon. In the years I've known her, I've never once heard her complain about anything. It was not an easy life either, at least not physically; there was always so much work to staying alive. But it was good work. Winter, the old man would come in from the trapline, cold, frost clustered like white down on his mustache and the few hairs on his chin. "Luck was with me," he'd say, and he'd throw a frozen lynx or a few marten or a wolf on the floor of the cabin, and when they had thawed he would spread an old blood-covered tarp on the floor and do the skinning. My mother would be there with him, doing the chores of living, cooking, carrying wood, helping him stretch the pelts, making pots of coffee for other villagers dropping by all hours of the day or night.

I remember those days when I was still home, before they sent us outside to high school and we began to lose touch. It's taken me too long to figure out I wanted that old way for my own. I wanted to come in off the land and be there with a woman who took on that life without a question.

But so much has changed. When I was young the village was still only a simple collection of small log cabins along a single dirt street. But now since oil's been tapped up on the north slope and the state's got all kinds of money, there's a new red steel school building, a big, frame community hall, a power plant, and a TV and a phone in every cabin from a fancy satellite system. And

the landing strip, which was once just a rutted dirt track cut through frayed willows, is now a long, graded run-way, with red and blue perimeter lights that the young boys sometimes shoot with their .22's. It's still a dry village, no booze allowed, but more and more there's bootleg coming in from Fairbanks. Yes, a lot has changed in just a few years. There's been a speed-up in the living, and in the dying.

One way or the other, so many of us have gotten pulled away from the life. And now the things we got pulled away from, it's hard to find what they ever were in the first place. In most ways the old times were easier than now. At least then we understood the place death had.

How I came to be with Annie, I've never been quite clear on that. Annie had her own reasons for choosing me and not Silas. Because I was quieter, less sure of myself, maybe I felt safer to her.

That night of the dance, late in the evening, most of us young ones were standing around outside the hall in the frozen air, breathing clouds of frost through the dim light thrown from the windows of the hall. Silas had disappeared somewhere with Florence Carlo. The fiddle and guitar were into a slow waltz. Annie came up to me standing there with the rest of the boys. "Hey, shy one," she said. "Malcolm Carol." And I remember my heart stopping in my chest. There were no words in my mouth. Nothing in my mind except embarrassment for things I had no clue about. "You want to dance with me, Malcolm?" And it began then, my helpless tumble into Annie's net, a slow dawning that I and not Silas would be with her. Nothing mattered the rest of the year at boarding school but seeing her in the spring. And when spring finally came I hurried home to be with her.

We played our tune our own way those first years together. We tried the village for a short while, but for Annie it was never right; the restlessness

pulled at her. She talked me into moving into Fairbanks. The kids came a short while later, but still there were too many parties and too much wildness in Annie for her to settle into something quiet.

And I went along with it, drawn along too easily, too young, too pliable to know I had a choice in anything. I've only come lately to know some things about choice. I guess knowing only comes after you've lost things that matter. Pulling those things back, that's where the real work begins. And the truth is some things can't be pulled back, their occurrences only serve as reminders of the need to choose a way to live. I think it's all about choice, like it or not.

Last winter Silas and Ginny Beatus, Annie and I, were drinking down on Second Avenue in Fairbanks. Late night, cold, we started walking for Annie's and my trailer across the Chena River, out on the edge of town. The street lamps threw only a dim yellow light through the ice fog. Silas was acting so happy, so wild. He and Ginny and Annie had been doing a little coke along with the booze. We turned off Second onto Cushman and headed for the bridge. Silas was trailing behind us, talking about how he could fly. "I can fly just like a fuckin' bird," he kept saying, and nobody paid him much attention because it was cold, maybe forty-five or fifty below, and even drunk we knew we needed to get in somewhere warm. "I can fly just like a fuckin' bird." We got to the Cushman Street Bridge and began to cross, and Silas hollered, "You fuckers, I'm tellin' you I can fly! Look!" We all stopped and turned, and Silas was crawling up on the short concrete railing which runs the length of the bridge. "I can fly like the eagle." He spread his arms wide, teetering back and forth. And none of us moved. Maybe we were just too used to Silas' wildness. Maybe none of us figured this craziness was any different than any other time. And maybe none of us were whole enough to know the difference at that moment.

Annie hollered at him, "Get down, you dumb fucking Indian." Silas laughed, shouted, "I got wings. Look!" He began to flap his arms up and down. "I can fly!"

I may have started toward him or maybe I just want to think I did. It doesn't matter I guess. Because before any of us did anything that mattered, Silas launched himself out into the frozen air, straight out into the blackness. And for one instant he did fly. I saw that instant. And then he fell. And there was a pause before we heard him thud against the ice in the river, breath whooshing from him, life forced out of him like it had been driven with a hammer.

Annie hung over the bridge railing, looking down into the dark. "Damn you, Silas!" she screamed, "you've done it now you crazy son-of-a-bitch!" She began to wail, crying out not in the old mourning way, but in her own way, which carried the same meaning.

The rest of us just stood there in the cold, stunned but not surprised. I guess it can be said we have become numb to the craziness in our lives; there are no surprises in it any longer, there is only a feeling of helplessness which gnaws at us like a disease.

Fishing has been the way of things for as long as there's been people on this river. Those who have left for the city crave to be on the river in the summer. I know this.

When the kings quit running, there's a week or two not much comes up, a time to repair gear and get ready for the hottest days of July. Then, when the air stands still as death, the chums and silvers begin coming. Chums, dog salmon we call them, pale gray-brown flesh, fish to split and hang like laundry over spruce pole racks, to dry in the sun for the dogs' winter feed.

And silvers, battlers, sleek and firm, not as rich with oil as the kings, but still good fish to smoke for winter. If it's a good run, fishing for them is work with deep satisfaction in it, it's an honest life, survival.

It was a good run. Besides smoking silvers and putting up dog fish, we sold roe to a Japanese buyer who flew in in a float plane every couple days. It was round the clock work, so I didn't have much time to think about things.

Towards the end of the run, things slowed down enough that Ellis ran the boat down to the village for our mail, cigarettes, and a few groceries. I stayed and tended the wheel, tried to keep up with things. Ellis came back a couple days later, and he had a passenger with him. Annie.

She wasn't mad this time when she stepped out on the beach. She just looked tired and old, enough that for the first time ever her beauty was not my first impression. She smiled shyly at me, said, "Big surprise, huh?"

"It is," I said.

"I needed to see you." There was whiskey on her breath. She motioned toward the mossy knoll where we'd been the last time. "Can we go up there?"

So we climbed together and sat in the same spot. Big white and gray clouds were piling up over the hills to the north. The air carried that first faint bite of fall.

"Annie," I said, "where's the kids?"

"I left them in Fairbanks with Aunt Lucky. Didn't have enough money to bring them out here with me." She shook her head slowly. "I've been pretty fucked up since I was out here last. It hasn't been all that easy without you."

I didn't say anything to that, just sat silent. I know it's not the right thing probably, but the truth is I'd come to the point where I couldn't come up with any of the old feelings at all. All I saw in Annie was a past that I was glad

to be away from. In some ways it was like my heart had gone hollow. All I wanted was to survive.

"The kids miss you," she said. "They never say so, but I know they do."

I didn't say anything.

"You miss them?" she asked.

"Sometimes I do," I said. But I wasn't telling the whole truth. It's hard to admit this, because I know a man worth his salt should care about his kids. But there's no denying how it was for me right then. I could miss those kids if I let myself. But I wasn't. There was no use in it.

Annie spoke again. "You really are gonna stay away, aren't you. You aren't coming back to town?"

"I'm staying here," I said.

"What you gonna do for winter?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe I'll try to stay out here, get some kind of a cabin up before it turns too cold. I guess I'd like to try trapping again. I miss trapping like we did in the old days."

Annie reached in my shirt pocket. "You got a cigarette?" She pulled out my pack, lit one then gave the pack back. "I wish I could figure why goddamn Fairbanks pulls on me so. When I'm drinking it's the only time I feel happy anymore. I remember feeling happy back when we were kids, but I can't figure what came over us. It seems like everything just changed all of a sudden, the whole goddamn world."

"Look, Annie," I said. "It may not be a whole lot better in the village for the kids, but at least they'd be around their own people. At least there's a high school for them now, not like it was when we were kids. Maybe it will be good for them, maybe they'll find their roots."

She laughed at that, and reached out and took hold of my hand. "Roots?

Who you kidding? The only roots they'll find are . . .," and she broke it off, changed the subject. "You won't forget their birthdays, will you? You always were terrible at remembering birthdays and anniversaries and things like that."

"I'll try not to forget," I said to her.

"And you 'll tell them I love them. I told them they can come in and see me if you can get together enough money for the flight. Maybe if you trap you'll make enough to send them in to see me in the spring. "

"Maybe" I said.

We quit talking then, and we just sat there and gazed out at the river. A while later we watched Ellis move along the beach, feeding his dogs. Their excited barks echoed in the hills around us. Annie smiled, "That Ellis, he's a good man, isn't he?"

"He is," I said.

Then Annie turned to me, tears in her eyes. "Do you know how I miss Silas?

"I know you do," I said. And I did, knew right from the beginning she preferred Silas over me, but chose me because of some instinct for her own survival. I know, too, if she and Silas had gone together they would have been like a pair of Roman Candles shot into the night sky, flaring red and beautiful and quickly extinguished with only a bitter smell left as a reminder of their passing. I like to think some part of me figured I could save them both by going along with Annie's plan.

"Silas is dead, Annie," I said to her. "He's not coming back. If you had been with him, you'd be dead, too."

"Why not?" she said. "Why not be dead? What's so great about this life? You tell me, what's so great about it?"

I couldn't answer her, because what she asked me was what I was working on for myself. I didn't have the answer to it, at least not yet.

Annie hung out at our camp for the rest of the day. I gave her some money from the roe sales, and then I ran her on back to the village, stayed with her until the mail plane came in. We said good-bye out on the runway, and then she climbed the stairs up into the plane. I stood and watched the plane taxi and lift off and grow small and disappear in the distance.

Then I went over to my mother's cabin and sat with her. Her hair's white now, but she's still strong, does a full days work every day. Her hands are always busy. Since my father died a couple years back, Ellis has been living with her. She's taken to helping him with his work. When I sat with her she was working some Martin skins that Ellis had taken on his trap line last winter, breaking them on the edge of a stretching board.

We drank coffee together, mostly silent, but every now and then she'd ask me something about fish camp, how things were going there. I was just getting ready to leave, and she put her skin down, and looked at me serious. "How's Annie doin'?"

I took my time answering her. "Not doing all that well, I guess."

My mother shook her head. "She's taken on some hard ways, hasn't she?"

"She has," I said. "But I guess a lot of us have. "

"These are tough times," she said. "I wish it could be different but it's not."

"Caroline and Paul most likely'll be needing you," I said.

"It's come to that?"

"I guess it has," I said.

"I'll be here," she said, and she turned to her skin again.

I left my mother's cabin. Out on the street I stared thinking about trying to find some bootleg. I have to admit the idea pulled at me hard, even to the point I knocked on a couple doors, asking folks if they knew of any whiskey in town. And then I walked up to a third door and I saw my reflection in a window. What I saw there was a man who needed something else besides whiskey. I don't know what it was, how it worked the way it did, but seeing myself I found the courage to turn to the river. I got in the boat and headed on back to camp. A couple miles upriver I started feeling better, like for the first time in a long time I'd come out ahead on something.

Another week went by. Ellis and I were about finished up with the late run when Billy Nicholi came up the river again in his big boat. He was smiling when he got out, but he wasn't smiling like he usually smiles. Billy cleared his throat. "Malcolm," he said. "I needed to come tell you something." He frowned and pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket, lit it with a Bic lighter, took a long pull and exhaled. "Needed to come tell you your kids are down in the village, come in a couple days ago. They're doin' okay, stayin' with your mother." He shuffled his feet at the water's edge, making little puddles in the gray silt. "I thought about bringing them up here to be with you, but then I wasn't sure that you'd want that. We heard some tough news from Fairbanks."

"What'd you hear?" I asked him.

"Bootie got a call at the store from somebody at the Native Health Service. They wanted you to know that Annie's in the hospital. They found her in bad shape down on Two Street. Sounds like she drank too much, and maybe she tried doin' herself in. The truth is she must of tried pretty hard,

because they're not sure she's gonna make it. They say she spoke some, though. She was askin' for you. We thought you oughta' know that, Malcolm."

Billy offered to take me back to the village. I thanked him for coming up and told him I'd come later, Ellis could run me down.

So right now I'm sitting at the wheel again, up on the bluff above it, watching it turn. Funny, but I'm remembering a beaver that got picked up in the wheel once. It must have looked some sight coming up out of the river in the basket, then floundering down the chute into the box. Must have been one pissed off beaver. It didn't stay long, though, just chewed a hole through the plywood of the holding box and disappeared back into the river again. When Ellis and I checked the wheel, there were only his teeth marks left and some splinters. Ellis and I got a big laugh out of that one, imagining that beaver at work on the box.

High up on the hills the willows and dwarf birch are just starting to change from greens to reds and yellows. The Yukon is low, the wheel turning slow. I sit and watch it turn, watch the patient way the paddles carry the baskets against the current, watch the baskets hesitate as they begin to break from the water, and then as if they've made a decision, lunge into the air. How many thousand times has that wheel revolved this summer? How many fish have given their lives to it?

The summer run is petering out, very few fish come up in the baskets now. When they do they're ragged latecomers, beat up and close to their end. Ellis and I need to pull the wheel and winch it up on a high bank, away from the ice which will come soon.

I think there was nothing anyone could have done about Silas. I don't know exactly how or when he made a decision about dying, but I know he did.

Understanding the purpose of him dying does not come to me, though.

Perhaps some day it will. I welcome that.

I'm asking myself about Annie, what's her decision, and what's my place in it? The only thing that's clear to me: this thing called survival, it's never permanent, it's always only temporary. It's a hard thing to say, but it seems that Annie has had her length of surviving. She's decided; there's nothing anybody can do for her.

My kids, maybe when I get stronger I can take them on. Meantime, they'll do better with their grandmother. She'll be good for them. I'll go down to the village to see them this evening, see how they're settling in. Maybe there's something I can say or do for them if Annie dies. I hope so.

I know what you're most likely thinking, that I should be a father, that I should try to rescue Annie. You can make those judgements if you want, but they do no good. Because that's not the way it is for me right now. Any more would pull me under. What good would that be?

I'm thinking I need to get a set of cabin logs cut. Get Ellis to help me with them before he goes to the village for the winter. Have some insulation and roof material flown in from Fairbanks. Figure I'll make a low-walled, sixteen by sixteen, enough of a shelter to get me through. Ellis will let me have five or six of his young dogs for the trap line. I've got dried fish to feed them. No sno-machine for me. I'm going to do it the old way, or at least as old as I know how. Caroline and Paul want to come down and spend some time with me, that'd be okay. That might be good for all of us. Come spring maybe I'll feel up to moving back into the village. I could stay there until the kings start running again.

The Bear Man

This may sound like a tall tale to you. I'll tell you right up front that I'm not one to believe much in spirits and ghosts and stuff like that. I'll tell you, also, that it happened just the way I'm going to tell it. I'm a clerk at the Alaska Commercial Store here in town, the AC people call it. Ask anybody, if there's one thing I'm known for it's my memory. I can remember the details of most everything, like who bought what on what day, exactly what people said in a conversation, the weather on a particular day, years back even. My friends call me the Poet. I guess because I'm about the only one around here who's graduated from college - though it's been twenty years now - that and the fact that I like to read and write things down.

It was May 25th, about 11a.m., when he showed up. It was one of those fine days when spring's turning toward summer, warm and soft, just before the mosquitoes come in black, buzzing hordes. It was hard to tell exactly what race he was, a mix of Caucasian and Indian maybe, with a little Asian thrown in. He was a big guy, too, burly, with long, greasy, wind-driven hair, and a full, tangled beard. And he had small, intense eyes, wary as hell. They stabbed at the bystanders lounging around outside on the front porch of the AC. He wouldn't have been that noticeable, though, no more so than any number of other eccentrics and crazies that show up off the Yukon every summer, if it hadn't been for the fact that he was dressed almost entirely in

bear skins. His trousers were hair-out black bear, crudely cut to mid-calf and held together with strips of rawhide. Above he wore a full grizzly hide, with his head sticking through a ragged hole cut in the middle, like a Mexican *serape*. And he had a pouch made from the skin of a bear's head hanging around his neck. His only store-bought attire were a worn pair of once-white Converse basketball shoes, no socks, and a big silver ring on his left hand, with a large, pale-blue sapphire set like a cat's eye in the middle.

That night all of us regulars were in Coolie's, planted on our accustomed stools along the scarred plywood bar. Talk of hunting and firearms and women, our usual topics, was abandoned that night. Instead we took up the topic of the Bear Man.

Clarence Rooney claimed to be the one who had first seen him. Rooney's an ex-Texan and sometimes heavy-equipment operator up at the Early Mine, that is, when he can get work that doesn't tax him too much. He sat there on his stool at the middle of the bar, ran a hand, missing two middle fingers at the knuckles, through his full gray beard. "I was sittin' out there on the bench in front of the community hall, and I seen him walk out of the woods upriver. Son-of-a-bitch looked like a head-on collision tween a bear with mange and a mental hospital. Regular loony if I ever seen one." Rooney turned to me then. "What'd he buy in the AC, Poet?"

I reported that the Bear Man had purchased a twenty-five pound bag of CalRose rice, four boxes of pilot bread, a quart of Sue-Bee honey, two pounds of Hudson's Bay black tea, and a dozen cans of Spam. He paid for the stuff with some crumpled bills he fished from his bear head pouch. Then without saying anything to anybody he stuffed his purchases in a faded yellow canvas bag strapped on an old Trapper Nelson pack frame, and disappeared out the door toward the river.

Better-Dead-Than-Red Sickleman, sitting on his usual perch down at the far end where Coolie mixes drinks, slammed the dice cup down on the bar, hard enough it rattled glasses clear to the other end. "God damn, we get'em off that river, don't we? Every sicko, commie riff-raff in the country builds a raft upriver and comes floating on down here like there's no tomorrow. Ask me, that bastard's probably as commie as they come."

"For Christ sakes, Red," Rooney said to him, "if you ain't heard, the Communist world has folded."

"No it ain't," Red replied, "that's just another one of those devices the liberal press uses to get us to think that. No way it's folded, I can prove it. Why . . ."

When Red starts going on Communists you might as well pack a lunch. He's a retired army sergeant, got a seriously pocked face, short military haircut, nose swollen like a pomegranate. Red hates Communists, thinks everybody but him is close to being one. And it's a true fact his name's Sickleman. I always figured there was some irony in that. Red Sickleman.

It was Bella that cut him off. "Shut up, Red!" she said, mean enough that Red gave it up quick. Bella was sitting on her stool down on the far end opposite Red, her spot closest the front door, the only Indian and only woman sitting at the bar. Of course she was still beautiful, even with her eyes distant and cheeks gone slack from all her drinking. She dabbed at a wet ring on the bar with the sleeve of her stained, blue sweat shirt, then looked up at the bar at Rooney. "I saw him," she said. "I talked to him."

"The hell you did," Rooney said. "You talked to him?"

"I did," Bella said. "He came by my cabin."

"What'a you mean he come by your cabin?" Rooney said.

"He stopped and talked to me," Bella said, "on his way upriver."

"What'd he say?" Rooney said.

"Nothing much," Bella said. "He's not crazy, though. I can tell you that."

"The Hell," Rooney said. "Anybody walkin' around, dressed up like it's goddamn Halloween sure as hell ain't playin' with air in his ball."

It was while Bella and Rooney were going at it that T.J. Moody entered for his evening beers. T.J.'s our local bush pilot, a short fellow in his mid-fifties, starting to spread a little soft in the middle. He wears aviator Ray Bans day or night. There's some talk he even sleeps with them on, though nobody has ever actually witnessed him doing so. We call him "White Knuckles" behind his back, because of the terror he too often puts his passengers through.

T.J. slid onto his stool to the left of Rooney. Coolie put down his beer mug filled fifty-fifty with Jack Daniels and Pepto-Bismol, opened the cooler and slid T.J.'s Oly across the bar. "You hear about this crazy who was in town all dressed up in bear skins, T.J.?"

T.J. popped the tab on his beer, took a long pull, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked up and down the bar. "I saw this guy. This afternoon I was flying the Cessna south off the Rays, up there deliverin' fuel to the Early Mine, and I saw him up on a bare ridge top, trottin' straight back upriver toward the Tishna. I circled him, and I'll be a son-of-a-bitch if he didn't start jumpin' up and down, swingin' his arms at me like he thought he really was a bear." T.J. took another pull on his beer, eyed the label before he set it carefully back on the bar. "I'd have to agree with you, Rooney, that guy ain't landin' with his gear fully down."

Bella stood up from her stool then and looked at T.J. in disgust. "What'a you know about it, you damn taxi driver? You got no right to circle over some

fella who's just out takin' a walk through the woods. I'd take a swipe at you, too." She nodded, reassuring herself. "Damn right I would." Bella looked disdainfully at all of us along the bar. "I tell you something, it'd be a real pleasure to be with a man who wears bear skins. A man like that might be some true satisfaction. Not like you limp dicks."

Coolie smiled at her, "bear he was wearin' might do you more good in that regard, Bella."

Bella just glared at him. Then she stepped back from the bar and gave each one of us a hard stare. "Fuckers, she said, then turned and tacked her way to the door, her laceless sneakers floundering across the chipped floor. At the door she stopped and turned toward the bar. "That's all I want, just some goddamned satisfaction, and I'm sure not gettin' it in here, not around you sorry excuses." The screen door screeched open then, and Bella exited into a night lit full by the midnight sun.

Those of us at the bar were silent for a spell after she left. Bella's one of us regulars, at least she has been the last couple years. Before that she lived in a little Indian village that's downriver about forty miles. I remember the day she came into town and caught the mail plane to Fairbanks, a little less than three years ago. It was one of those crisp September days, with the aspen leaves turned their first brittle yellow, and the sandhill cranes, just off the nesting flats, warbling insanely by the thousands as they kettled upward through the thin fall air for their flight south. Bella was on her way to college, the University of Alaska. She carried the hopes of her village with her. She was the one who was going to make something of herself in the white man's world. I tell you this: if anyone could have, she was the one. She was a fine, dark-eyed young woman. All of us, Indian or white, had a crush on

her. She was as smart as they come, friendly and happy. She had it all going for her.

It was only a few months later, though, that she returned. The middle of winter when the sun's abandoned the land, Bella came back angry and disillusioned about life in the white world. She didn't want to go back downriver to her village and face the disappointment of her people, so she stayed here in this end-of-the-road town and took up the drinking ways, and started sleeping with Coolie. Coolie told me once when it was just him and me in the bar, that Bella had gotten mad at him once and told him that she didn't see how white people could have so much mean and stingy in them. "You're all like goddamn bloodsuckers," she said. "Don't give a damn about nothing but your own selves. All you want is more and more, and you don't care how you get it."

Coolie probably only added to her opinion of white people. He bought the bar the same year Bella left and came back. He came up here from Idaho, said he just wanted to get as far away from Mormons and Baptists as he could; he'd had his fill of Bible thumpers. He changed the name of the bar from The Arctic Rescue to Coolie's, and settled right in. Coolie is a good-looking fellow, tall, blond, I'd guess in his late thirties, but he's aging fast from something going haywire in his stomach. He took all the credit for stopping his fling with Bella. But the truth is things between Bella and him came to a quick halt when Coolie's wife showed up. Of course, he'd failed to mention anything about having a wife to anybody, Bella included. His wife got off the mail plane from Fairbanks, with a lemon colored miniature poodle under her arm, hair bleached and teased up like Dolly Parton, and a trunk full of polyester, Hawaiian flower print dresses. She settled into their two-room cabin behind the bar, did nothing much but eat Sara Lee frozen cakes she had flown in

from Fairbanks, and watch Clint Eastwood movies on her VCR. When she talked to anyone at all she talked about how she wished she was back in Idaho where there were supermarkets and cable TV and a hairdresser "who knows a thing or two about a real hair-do."

So his wife showed up and Coolie ended things with Bella. But Bella kept up what she could of the old arrangement. She drank when it was there for her, and when it wasn't she did what she needed to do to get it.

Rooney was the one who broke the silence after Bella left the bar that night. He pushed his damaged hand, palm down across the bar top. "Wonder what got into Bella. Reckon that's the earliest I seen her quit this place since she started comin' in here."

"Sure enough," Coolie added. "All kinds of exciting things happening in town today isn't there? What'a you figure that bear guy's up to , T.J.?"

"Oh hell, I don't know," T.J. replied, "I reckon he's just a passer-by, one of those weirdos we get through here on the river this time of year. Most likely won't see him again."

Little did T.J. know.

Bella didn't show up at Coolie's the next night. Her absence was noticed. Theories for it ranged from Red's suggestion that she might have fallen in the river, to Rooney speculating that she might have eaten some of her own cooking and taken sick. "I ate a moose stew she made one time," he said, "and it took me a week to get over the runs. Damn moose must have been a road kill or something."

The next evening, though, Bella appeared, sober, with her black hair brushed back and held in place by a red and blue beaded comb. She wore a clean white sweat shirt with a faded picture of Beethoven on the front. Coolie

slid a beer across the bar to Bella, but she ignored it. She walked straight over to T.J. Moody sitting at the bar with the rest of us regulars and two downriver Indians. "T.J." she said, "I want you to take me up in that Super Cub of yours to find that Bear Man."

T.J. turned on his stool to face her. "That's goin' to take some good money, Bella."

"I'll have my Permanent Dividend check in October," she said. "I'll sign you a note on it right now."

T.J. shook his head. "You don't want do that, Bella. That money'll do a lot for you this winter. What the hell you want to find that Bear Man for anyway?"

Bella bristled. She took a step closer to him. "I *need* to find that Bear Man, T.J." It's none of your damn business why. You a bush pilot for hire, or what?"

"Okay, Bella," T.J. said, "it's your money."

"Damn right it is," Bella agreed.

T.J. took his time finishing his beer, his fourth for the evening, ignoring Bella who stood behind him tapping her foot impatiently. Finally he took the last pull, set the can down carefully and turned to Bella. "Well, let's get the hell out of here."

"You feeling okay to fly, T.J.?" Coolie asked him.

"Sure I am," T.J. said. "Always did figure it's safer to fly shit-faced than to fly hung over. Give me one of those Oly's to take with me. Kind of a survival kit."

T.J. pocketed the beer, then he and Bella headed for the air strip at the far end of town, a gravel runway with T.J.'s planes parked alongside. Those of us left in the bar gave them a few minutes, then we walked out front and

waited for the lift-off. The air was still as death, a smudge on which clouds of newly hatched mosquitoes swarmed. We watched the Cub clear the end of the strip and wobble off to the north, toward the night sun hanging low and golden on the horizon. Just beyond the silt brown of the Yukon, the Cub banked to the east, then climbed toward ranks of gunmetal and white cumulus clouds towering giant-like above the green hills. It was one pretty evening, I remember that.

Rooney shook his head, muttered to himself as we all turned to go back into the bar. "Bear huntin' sure as hell ain't what it used to be." Not that Rooney ever killed a bear that I know of. To hear him talk, though, you'd think he was a direct descendant of Daniel Boone.

Around 2 a.m. a couple of downriver Indians got in a fight in the back room over the score of a pool game. Coolie had to get out from behind the bar and threaten their lives with his "peacemaker," a club he fashioned from the lower leg of a bull moose. When he got back to his position behind the bar he announced to the regulars: "Old White Knuckles most likely'll know where that Bear Man is. But it isn't likely him and Bella'll be back before morning. They probably put down on a gravel bar someplace out on the river, spend the night there. You fellas might as well go on home."

T.J. and Bella returned early the next morning. Bella walked on back to her cabin, out on the edge of town, without saying anything to anyone. T.J. left soon after in his Cessna, with another load of fuel for the Early Mine. So news of the search for the Bear Man had to wait until T.J. finally showed up in the bar late that night. When T.J. entered, Coolie was quick to slide him his first Oly. "What happened out there last night, T.J.?"

The bush pilot ignored him, just made a show of relishing his beer, buying some peanuts, clearly taking his time, which he's prone to do when the attention's on him.

Rooney leaned forward, agitated. "Quit dickin' around, T.J.," he said, "and tell us what happened out there."

T.J. smiled, took off his aviator Ray Bans and slipped them in his shirt pocket. "Well, we found him just up from the mouth of the Tishna. I figured he was up there in those old abandoned trapper cabins. I put the Cub down on a bar out on the Yukon, and Bella and I walked back up through the woods to the cabins. I tell you what, that crazy bastard's up there trying to pull one of em' together like he figures to live in it the winter. Most likely be another damn body I'll have to drag out in the spring."

T.J. took another sip of his beer, looked up and down the bar just to make sure everyone was paying attention. "He's got a whole slew of canned goods, and an old sheet metal stove that he must of put off a raft that he built upriver. He's got all his stuff carried up there to the cabin, and he's put it into pretty fair shape for a *Cheechako*."

"Commie bastard," Red said. "I ..."

"Rooney cut him off. "Red, for Christ's sake, it ain't like with some canned goods and a sheet metal stove he's a threat to the security of the United States of America. Just for once keep it to yourself, would you?"

"Anyway," T.J. continued, "we went up there and he must have heard us land, because he wasn't around the cabin. Must have knew we were comin' up to see him, so he snuck off through the woods."

"Then what?" Coolie asked.

"So Bella took right off walking through the woods lookin' for him. I waited there by the cabin for her, pulled up a stump and watched the Tishna

flow by. I tell you what, it's real pretty out there. Sometimes I forget how pretty it can be, with the water runnin' clear in the Tishna and those high calico bluffs on the far side. Flying over it every day it just isn't the same. Course I don't suppose I'd be up for winterin' in one of those cabins. Could be a pretty grim time. Freeze your hiney off."

"That's a fact," Coolie agreed. He pulled another Oly out of the cooler for T.J., not taking his eyes off him while he snapped the tab. "What's he up to?"

T.J. took the beer from Coolie and shrugged. "He's a mystery to me. I sat there for an hour or so, Bella she still wasn't comin' back, so I got up and started snoopin' around a little, but there's not a clue of who this fella is. It's like he came out of nowhere, like he landed from outer space."

"I'll be a son-of-bitch," Rooney said. "What'd Bella say when she come back?"

"I got tired of hanging around the cabin swattin' mosquitoes," T.J. said, "so I went back to my plane and waited for her, pulled my old fart sack out of the back and hunkered down on the gravel bar. Bella came back early morning. She just walked over to the plane and crawled in. Didn't say squat to me. When we landed back here she got out and walked on back to her cabin. Haven't talked to her since."

"Records are being set here," Coolie said. "First, there's a couple nights in here without Bella. And if that's not enough, an occasion she didn't have anything to say. This is getting to be pretty serious stuff."

You can say what you will about what I'm about to tell you. Call me a liar if you want, but I'm telling you the God's truth that right after Bella got back, the very next day in fact, a big grizzly bear started prowling the outskirts of town, especially hanging out there by Bella's cabin. Not that a

bear around town is so unusual. One shows up every now and then, and usually somebody shoots it. What made this one strange, though, is how it behaved. It seemed fearless, and when a couple fellows went out to shoot it it disappeared like a ghost, only to show up again as soon as they went away, like it knew exactly what they were up to.

This went on for four or five days, the bear hanging around town and Bella never showing up at the bar. I got a little worried about her, so I took off from work and went out to see how she was doing, took my rifle with me just in case. Bella met me at the door, cold sober, but wouldn't let me in. "What'a you want, Poet?" I told her we were worried about her with this big grizzly roaming around and hanging close to her place. "Don't you worry about me," she said, "that bear isn't bothering me."

There was no more talking with her. She shut the door on me. Still, I was concerned about her, so I went out again the next day. When I knocked nobody answered. I looked in her window, and she was gone, she had just disappeared. Nobody around town knew where she was, though there was all kinds of speculation, like she may have gone back to her village, or maybe she went into Fairbanks and took up drinking there. Nobody had seen her depart, though. And the real interesting part of it is that as soon as she left the grizzly wasn't spotted again, either. It just disappeared, too.

We were all stumped regarding Bella's whereabouts, until one day toward the end of June T.J. Moody came into Coolie's after a long spell of flying. "I saw Bella," he said as he sat down. "I was flying a couple of backpackers up over the Tishna and I saw her. She's up there with that Bear Man. Came out of the cabin and waved at me like she was havin' the time of her life."

"I'll be damned," Rooney said, "she's gone Indian on us."

Coolie slid T.J. his first beer. "She must have gotten word to her brother Freddy to come on up from the village in his boat and take her up there to the Tishna. You know that silent bastard, Freddy, he's been in here a couple times lately and he's never said anything about it to anybody."

"I suspect you're right," T.J. said, "Bella's gone off the deep end. Can't figure what's got into her. Don't guess there's a damn thing we can do about it, though."

I didn't say anything to anybody about it, but from the beginning when Bella first asked about the Bear Man, and later when she got T.J. to take her up to look for him, in my opinion it was like she was pulled, like she couldn't help herself. I couldn't help but think of this Indian legend I read once. It had to do with Indians believing that bears, of all the animals, were closest to humans, in fact were considered half human. Once a bear disguised himself as a man and entered an Indian village and seduced a beautiful young woman there, the most desirable woman in the whole village. She was helplessly drawn to him. He told her to come with him. She accompanied him back to his lair, and there the woman copulated with him, after which the man revealed himself as a grizzly bear. The woman was helpless. She could not return to her village. The bear owned her.

This story stuck in the back of my mind as summer moved through the solstice. The King Salmon ran in the river, just like they always have, and some people got busy putting up winter fish. July came on, the hot, dry, thunder and lightning season, when smoke from bush fires obscures the sun, and in the black spruce bogs mosquitoes cloud the air so thick that breathing becomes a full-time chore. T.J. continued to fly over the Tishna whenever he could. He would come back to Coolie's and report that Bella would come out of

the cabin or run from the woods into the clearing, and wave at him. "Seems happy as a hog in mud," he'd say. "Never see squat of the Bear Man, though."

I reported that two of Bella's brothers, Freddy and David, had been in the store and loaded up with groceries and gas and headed upriver instead of downriver to their village. Didn't say where they were going, but it seemed pretty obvious they were headed up to see Bella.

Toward the middle of July, mid afternoon on a Sunday, a couple of young, long haired characters, dressed in shorts and torn t-shirts, slouched through the front door and eased up to the bar. They ordered beers. As Coolie pulled the beers out of the cooler, he asked, "You boys floatin' the river?" The taller of the two shook his head in the affirmative. Coolie slid the beers across the bar to them. "Seen any game along the way?"

"We saw a big grizzly up by the Tishna," the taller of the two answered.

And then he proceeded to tell us about seeing this bear, and then passing a cabin close by and thinking they should tell the people living there that a bear was in the neighborhood. They pulled onshore and were met by a young, good-looking Indian woman. She was friendly, made them coffee, chatted up a storm. They told her about seeing the grizzly, and she said not to worry, she was used to the bear being around. They were in the middle of their second cup when this burly looking guy showed up all dressed in bear skins. "He wasn't too friendly," the tall floater said. "He just sat out on the porch and glared at us through the door. Tell you the truth, he's one pretty spooky fucker."

"How's the woman doing?" Rooney asked.

"She seems pretty happy," the taller floater answered. "Said she likes it living out there on the land. She's gonna winter there with the bear guy. She's found her roots, she says."

"Roots," Rooney snorted, "that's what she's gonna end up eatin' if she stays out there the winter. I tell you what."

"So the bear guy didn't talk at all, huh?" Coolie asked.

Rooney cut in. "He didn't say anything about where he come from, or nothin'?"

"Nothing," the shorter of the two floaters answered.

"Don't that beat all," Rooney said. "Maybe the son-of-a-bitch is mute or something. Maybe he had an accident and damaged his brain."

The end of August came. The first faint reds touched the dwarf birch in the high places. On the back sloughs and thaw lakes along the river, green-winged teal and pintail broods tested newly feathered wings. And in Coolie's, business was booming; villagers who had been out fighting fires were just returned from days on the lines, flush with cash.

Early evening, all us regulars were in our places at the bar, Coolie serving drinks, Better-Dead-Than-Red and Rooney arguing over the merits of the Weatherby .270 magnum rifle versus the Winchester .300, T.J. Moody talking with a couple firefighters. Me just watching it all.

It was then that Bella walked in. She entered like she'd never been gone a day. Barefoot, dressed in faded Levis and a red t-shirt that contrasted cleanly with her sun-darkened skin, she headed straight to her old place at the close end of the bar. "That's my stool you're sittin' on," she said to the firefighter there. He gave her the seat. As Bella slid in she pointed down at the bar surface, indicating she wanted a beer.

Coolie, at the far end of the bar, nodded at Bella, and was quick to pull one from the cooler. "Welcome back, Bella," he said as he slid the beer across the bar to her.

Bella only nodded, picked up the can and downed it in a half dozen quick gulps. Her left hand shook as she placed the empty deliberately back on the bar. On her left thumb she wore a ring with a large, pale-blue sapphire. She looked up at those of us along the bar. "What you boneheads staring at?"

"Nothing, Bella," Coolie assured her. "We're just glad to see you back."

"What you been up to, Bella?" T.J. asked.

"I've been up on the Tishna."

"We know *that*," Rooney said, "with the Bear Man."

Bella's eyes flashed. "He ain't the Bear Man."

"Well excuse me," Rooney said, "but it ain't like we have any other name for him. It's not like he's introduced himself around here or nothin'. What'a you want us to call him?"

Bella ignored the question. "If a guy wants to wear bear skins it's his own damn business."

"Sure, Bella," T.J. Moody agreed, "it's okay to wear bear skins if a fellow wants to. Free country. We're just interested in what you've been up to, that's all."

"I'm up to whatever I want to be," Bella said.

T.J. Moody smiled at her, motioned for Coolie to give her another beer. "We know that, Bella, we're not trying to pick a fight or anything. We're just glad to see you. I haven't talked to you since I first took you up there to the Tisha back in June."

"Yeah," Bella said, and picked up her second beer and downed it with the same deliberate attention as the first. "Give me another," she said.

There was little else of sufficient interest to do that night but watch Bella drink. By closing time she was incoherent, so gone that Coolie asked me

to borrow the AC pickup and help him load her in the back. The two of us took her out to her cabin.

It was out at Bella's cabin that we saw the big grizzly again. August like it was, it was getting dark at night. When we pulled up in front of Bella's cabin the grizzly moved through the woods behind it, quick like a big cat. Coolie looked at me, surprised. "That's that same goddamned bear again, isn't it?"

"It looks like it," I said.

"Something's strange going on here," Coolie said. "*Damn* strange if you ask me."

I couldn't help but think of the Indian story again. How the woman got lonely for her people and wanted to go back to her village, and how the bear didn't want her to return. I said nothing about it to Coolie, though. He was already spooked enough.

We carried Bella inside and put her on her cot, covered her up with an old army sleeping bag. When we went outside we were pretty nervous about the bear being around, so we hustled back into the truck. But we didn't see it again that night, even when we backed around and shined the pickup headlights off into the woods.

The next night Bella showed up at Coolie's again, and Coolie said something to her about the grizzly being outside her cabin. "Don't you worry about that bear," she said, "it's none of your business." And then she made that night a close duplicate of the first. Coolie suggested to her that she might slow down a little. Bella told him, "Mind your own business. It's my life. I'm sick and tired of people telling me what to do."

"I guess," Coolie replied, "but it's me and the Poet who end up packing you home at closing time."

Which we did again that night, and again we saw the bear outside her cabin. This time it didn't run, but just stood off in the woods and stared at us, it's eyes angry red dots in the high beams.

I had my rifle along. I grabbed it and stepped out of the truck, and the bear disappeared like it had never been there.

"This is getting entirely too weird," Coolie said. "I'm thinking we need to get some of the boys together and get rid of that grizzly." So Coolie and I went over and tried to wake Rooney up, but he was too far gone. "Maybe we should just wait until tomorrow," Coolie said, "see what comes of it. If that damn bear is around tomorrow, we'd better do something about it."

The third night most of the firefighters were gone from Coolie's, exited downriver to the village. Bella came once again, ragged and turned inward. She began drinking deliberately, taking no prisoners, like she was committed to the annihilation of something inside her. She was only a short distance on her journey, when the front door opened. Better-Dead-Than-Red nodded toward the door. "That's him," he whispered, "the bear loony."

We all turned to the door. There, just inside, stood the Bear Man, dressed in his grizzly serape, his hair-out cut-offs and Converse basketball shoes. He glanced warily around, holding his arms extended low at his waist, as if he wished to pull in something that was missing. Bella, her back to the door, was the last to turn. Her eyes widened as they focused on him. "What you doin' here?" she said, almost in a whisper.

The Bear Man advanced toward her a step or two, then stopped. When he spoke his voice was low, gravelly, unused. "You are coming back," he said.

Bella shook her head. "You didn't need to come in here, I woulda' come back sooner or later." She said it with the old edge of anger, but there was something else, too, something more resigned beneath the anger.

"You come," he said softly.

"Go back to the cabin," Bella said. "I'll come when I'm ready."

The Bear Man took another step towards her. He held his arms in the same extended way, swaying from the waist, his knees slightly bent.

T.J. was the first one of us to speak: "How you doing? I'm T.J. Moody, the guy who flies over your place every now and then." Without taking his eyes off the Bear Man he spoke to Coolie. "Coolie, get this man a beer."

The Bear Man shook his head. "No, no beer."

"No beer?" T.J. said. "Well then why don't you let me buy you a soda or something. How about a Pepsi?"

"Leave him alone," Bella said, "he doesn't drink Pepsi."

"Suit yourself," T.J. said.

The bear turned away from T.J. and back to Bella. "You must come," he said.

Rooney spoke up. "Maybe Bella ain't wantin' to go with you. Kinda' seems that way if you ask me."

The Bear Man turned to Rooney. "Who are you?"

"What business is it of yours, who I am?" Rooney said.

Bella burst out, "Rooney, damn it!, you stay out of this. You don't know what you're getting into."

The Bear Man spoke to Bella again. "This is not what you want."

"How do you know what I want?" Bella said. "Maybe I want to die on this bar stool. You don't own me."

The Bear Man stepped closer, until he was inches away from her. He extended his arms and took her face in both hands. "You are something else," he said. "I have shown you that."

Bella looked up at him, but said nothing.

"You come," the Bear Man said gently. "I have a gift for you."

"What gift?" Bella asked.

"I'll give it to you when you come. You'll see."

The Bear Man turned away from Bella then, and moved to the door. As he put his hand on the piece of caribou antler that made up the door handle, he paused, turned and faced at all of us sitting at full attention along the bar. He stood straighter, held his arms at half mast again, and began swaying back and forth from the hips, his head held high like an old boar grizzly searching for signals on the wind.

He motioned to Bella with both hands. "Come," he said. Then he turned, and I swear this, swear it as I'm alive and telling it to you now, but as he turned and shuffled through the door he became a bear. I'm not talking about a man dressed up for Halloween. I'm talking a grizzly, the very bear we'd been seeing outside Bella's cabin. We all saw it. Better-Dead-Than-Red Sickelman, T.J. Moody, Clarence Rooney, Coolie, a couple other townspeople in there, all of us.

Things were deadily quiet in Coolie's after the Bear Man left, quieter than I'd ever heard it before.

After a spell, Bella stood up from the bar. She pushed the empty in front of her to the floor. It clattered, loud as a freight train, and rolled toward the door. As I watched Bella her features softened. She was transformed again into the young woman who had left on the plane for Fairbanks that autumn day years earlier. All the promise of that young woman stood there, anxious, naive, hopeful. Nothing was impossible and nothing was understood completely.

She smiled, the first I can remember since she'd come back from Fairbanks three years earlier. Then she held up her left hand, the one with

the pale blue sapphire on the thumb. "Good-bye," she said. And with that she turned, and without looking back she walked to the door. She opened it and stepped through, out into the night, where the advancing darkness of autumn promised the hard hand of winter soon.

The bar was silent for a long time after Bella left. Rooney finally spoke up. "Damn Coolie, what you puttin' in these drinks?"

I know we all saw it, though I may be the only one who will say it. I watched the others start to put a lid on it right away. I watched their minds turn around what they'd seen, rationalize it into denial. The evening was young; none of us had had too much to drink. I absolutely know, though, that we all saw what we saw. And another thing I know: Bella's out there with the Bear Man again.

In my mind the story's not done. I'm just reporting what I know up to this point. All I can think about is how in the Indian fable the woman had two children with the bear. Twins, a boy and a girl. How they were born in February, the same time as bears give birth. How February is nine months from June, the time Bella first went out to find the Bear Man. In the fable, the woman's brothers determine to kill the bear. He senses they are coming to kill him, and he tells the woman. She doesn't want her brothers harmed, so she convinces the bear to give his life to them, which he does. Then the woman goes back to the village with her brothers, but they never accept her fully again, because she has copulated with a bear. Eventually, out of frustration, she turns into a bear herself, her children with her, and she kills all her relations; she reverts to the wild.

I know the stories don't exactly parallel, things have come about differently in Bella's story. But there are haunting similarities, too. Perhaps Bella's story is one for this day and age.

It's late October now. There's snow on the ground that won't disappear until spring. All the summer birds are gone, the woods are still as death. The Yukon is flowing ice, crystals collecting and freezing into bigger and bigger chunks until very soon the whole river will be a wide, white, frozen ribbon running for a thousand miles. It's too early to know if Bella will have children in February. I would like to go out there later this winter, up along the frozen Yukon on my sno-machine, to see her, to see if she might be pregnant. Perhaps around Christmas I'll go. I'll take her some gifts.

One question keeps haunting me: who are Bella's brothers now? Are they her blood brothers down in the village or us regulars here in Coolie's?

Antlers

The summer of 1969, my second year in Alaska, I was twenty-four years old and the foreman on a trail crew, the only white man and the youngest, in charge of a crew of four Inupiat Eskimos who had come to the mainland from the wind-swept bleakness of Saint Lawrence Island. My foremanship was one of those easy assumptions made by a dominant culture: the fact that I was white, could write tolerably well, and speak English with a Midwestern accent meant I was the one chosen to lead these men. Saint Lawrence Island is one of the most remote places on the planet, lying closer to Siberia than Alaska out in the storm-thrashed Bering Sea. This location makes for tough and seriously capable people. I knew next to nothing about anything. These men I was in charge of could travel by dog team for miles over the frozen sea, using only the forms of drifted snow for a compass. They could sit patiently for hours over a seal's breathing hole, completely still and Zen-like, waiting for a kill. After days out on the ice they could find their way unerringly through a winter darkness so complete it holds the world for months at a time. Back they came to a tiny spot lost in an eternal white expanse, home to a small, plywood shack huddled among other small, plywood shacks set out on the sparse tundra, just up from the edge of the unforgiving sea.

Theirs was an arduous and tenuous existence, yet they were entirely pleasant and humorous men, completely at ease with themselves. And they were always kind to me, even though I know there were times I deserved less. Those men were a gift to me, I know now, an opening to another world. For they knew some essential things, ways of being that I yearned to understand.

We were laying out trail in the alpine tundra country of the Crazy Mountains, and had gone a long time, weeks as I recall, without any fresh meat, subsisting mainly on macaroni, canned beans, and Hershey bars. Everyone was tired of the diet, though I suspect I more than my crew, because every day they managed to supplement our store-bought fare with birds' eggs and greens and who knows what else they scavenged off the tundra. They got a big kick out of offering me the more questionable morsels. "You want this little egg?" Bill Soonagrook would say. "It's got a little bird growing in it."

"It's all yours," I'd say. "I'm not all that much into little birds."

"Okay," he'd say, "but you don't know what you're missin'."

"I'm sure of that," I'd say.

Or when we'd catch some Grayling: "You want this little fish head?"

"No, thanks."

"The eyes, they's the best part you know?"

"No thanks, I'll stick with the worst parts."

"Okay, suit yourself." And then he'd make a big show of tipping his head back and dropping the fish head between parted teeth. He'd chew with exaggerated pleasure, eyes half closed. When he was done he'd shake his head in mock concern. "You white guys sure don't know much about eatin'. Kinda worries me."

One day late August a small herd of Caribou came down off the mountain above us, and literally walked through camp. The season was open, and at that time, south of the Yukon, we were allowed three apiece. I had an old 30-30 Winchester 94 along, so I leaped out of my tent and dropped three: two small bulls and a yearling female. The Eskimos were delighted and got right to work butchering. They had two of the Caribou skinned and quartered, and the head of the yearling boiling in a five gallon Blazo can,

before I managed to get the skin all the way off mine. The old man on the crew, Jimmy Walunga, came over to help me finish up. He shook his head in disgust when he saw that I'd cut the skin on the legs off halfway below the elbow. "You sure messed up a coupla' pretty good pairs of muk-luk tops."

"I didn't know," I replied.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess that's right."

What *did* I know? I'd killed them; those Eskimos wanted me to know how to make muk-luks, too? Besides, I was more interested in the antlers than any muk-luks. I sawed them off the heads of the two bulls, and indicated I was going to keep them, was intending to pack them out. The Eskimos were astounded. "You can't eat them things, you know?" Jimmy said. "They ain't even gonna make no soup."

To them, keeping antlers was on par with holding onto the price tag from a cellophane-wrapped beef steak. That is, unless you needed antlers for tools or carving or ceremony, which wasn't our case. But in the way of tolerant people, they accepted my strange white man notions, my ignorance of the practicalities of life. They even helped me pack the antlers to the road, and stayed mum on the fact that we transported them in a US Government vehicle, a big violation of the federal employee code.

I was just a twig of a kid, hungry for adventure and the wild, when I killed my first mule deer on a forest and sagebrush slope in western Colorado. It as a fine autumn day, the wind blowing gusts of yellow aspen leaves through the air like fluttering snowflakes. I shot poorly and the buck ran some ways before he dropped. I approached him cautiously, then stood over him, feeling for the first time that mix of awe and pain and sadness that comes

with killing. There was also a strange regret with it, some sense that this thing I'd done was inevitable, but I wished it could be different.

The feelings passed, and I appraised the buck's antlers. Not his primeness or his size or the beauty of his pelt, but his antlers. Killing that mule deer was the beginning of a fascination with antlers. I had killed a male of another species, and I had the proof of it, a trophy of my own prowess; I know now that I unconsciously believed that I had in some way, too, affirmed my own maleness.

As a kid and into early adulthood I lived to hunt. I went to Alaska at the age of twenty-three, determined to take all the antlered animals there, as well as most anything else that moved. It was those first Caribou antlers, though, that meant the most. I was captured by their beauty.

This I know, those who kill are attracted at some level to the beauty of the animal they've killed. Odd as it may seem, that's one of the justifications for hunting. And that's one of the places the whole idea gets confusing. What compels us to kill beauty, to want to own it? Is it still the same beauty hanging on a den wall as it is in the wild? What is it in the modern psyche that is so different from the Eskimos I worked with on the trail crew, this need to possess and display remnants of once living things?

Since those early days with the trail crew in Alaska, many times I've watched Caribou in the high Arctic stream by my camp by the thousands. I've observed other large herd migrations elsewhere in the world. For me, though, Caribou migrating is the ultimate spectacle. It's the flow of abundance across the harsh cut of an Arctic landscape, a sea of antlers bobbing and catching the sun in a thousand ways. I thought it then and still do today, Caribou antlers are one of the most astoundingly graceful, ornate,

aesthetically flawless designs of any found in nature. To see so many at once is to witness something beyond beauty.

In the Arctic, killing Caribou can come too easy at times. I've glassed several hundred bulls at once, taking my time, looking for the largest antlers. I've often thought I might have some sense of what the old-time bison hunters must have felt -- limitlessness, the blood instinct rising up from the offer of sheer numbers. (It may be outside the scope of this essay, but I need to say it here, that the idea of great numbers of Caribou can be deceiving. Given the vast expanse of the Arctic, Caribou numbers have always been spread relatively thin. Today, add oil development and other industrial attacks on the Arctic, and you have Caribou numbers declining in too many places. In my mind Caribou *are* the Arctic; their condition symbolizes the whole.)

Antler to body weight ratio, Caribou carry the biggest antlers of any deer world-wide. In Caribou (and the sub-species, reindeer) both the bulls and the cows have antlers, the only deer species in the world where this is the case. Speculation by Caribou biologists is that this is a special, open-country adaptation. Caribou females' antlers are generally the size of those of two-and-a-half-year-old bulls. They've evolved this way so the females can compete with young males for critical winter feeding spots. Caribou bulls also cast their antlers earlier than cows, thus leaving the cows at an advantage in the competition for critical food sources, insuring them a nutritive edge for the physically taxing spring calving period.

It's pretty well accepted among wildlife biologists that antlers on the males of all species of deer generally serve one purpose and one purpose only: that of attracting females of the same species, and of competing for those females so the species can propagate and survive.

I have fuzzy memories of a visiting Czechoslovakian professor I had when I was studying wildlife biology back in the early Seventies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Anthony Bubenik was a graying and wiry little man who spoke correct but heavily accented English. He was known in the wildlife business as an expert on antlered ungulates (and he and his son, George, remain so today). Focusing his research on the historic development and function of antlers, he postulated that antlers, as they have evolved, are the sole sexual attractant for female deer -- the bigger the antlers the more likely a particular male is going to succeed as a breeder. His research method consisted of strapping a set of European Red Deer antlers on his head and going out into the rutting fields. Bubenik would put his head down and paw the ground, challenging the biggest males. What he discovered is that essentially all that they saw of him were his antlers; what kind of body the antlers were on made little difference. The same went for the females. The bigger the antlers Bubenik strapped on, the more likely they were to desire him.

Bubenik came to class one time with a slide projector and a collection of faded and grainy slides that said volumes about the state of photographic art in Eastern Europe at the time. I recall two of them. One showed Bubenik with a massive set of red deer antlers strapped to his head. His back to the camera, crouched low, our professor challenged an equally massive set of antlers solidly connected to a very mature and able-looking Red Deer. Asked by a student what he did when the deer decided to take him on, Bubenik laughed. "Why I encourage him, of course." Then he smiled and shrugged. "But if he insists, well then one must choose, what you call, ah ... retreat."

In the other slide the antlered Bubenik closed in on a group of females. The cows' ears were perked forward, clearly intrigued by this virile-looking

specimen. Nobody asked Bubenik what came next, though I do vaguely recall some jokes circulating later among the male students about the pressing need to obtain a set of antlers.

If antlers are appendages grown for the sole purpose of sexual display and conquest, then why are they shed each year? From a practical standpoint it might seem a waste, particularly considering the massive amounts of energy and nutrients that go into making a set of antlers annually. The experts come up with a pretty plausible theory, though. Antlers are shed to keep pace with the increasing body size of maturing males. The bigger, more virile males are the best breeders, so selection gives them antlers to match. Logically enough, as males pass their sexual peak, assuming they live that long, their antler size begins to decrease accordingly.

Some of the connection between modern men's fascination with antlers and what they symbolize for us seems fairly obvious. In European cultures size is what matters, the bigger the better. Men kill antlered animals and hang their heads on walls out of some belief, apparently, that doing so in some way affirms their maleness. Virility, stealth, and the ability to possess life as a denial of one's own mortality are all some way implied by a trophy. And there is also the notion that some aesthetic has been captured, as if the living beauty of something wild can some way be preserved and owned. The Boone and Crockett Club has developed a complex points system for scoring antler size. "Making the book," it's called. Men compete for the biggest, most unusual, the best.

And in certain Asian cultures the attention to antlers takes on an oral quality. Some Asian men are obsessed with so-called aphrodisiacs made from powdered antlers. Antlers are literally worth their weight in gold. Perhaps nothing speaks more clearly of an unconscious desire to return to some

essential connection, to rekindle a spiritual reunion, then imagining that the sexual attractant of deer can be ingested and somehow that potency, that vital, beautiful maleness can be captured and utilized.

Both practices, trophies and aphrodisiacs, seem to suggest that industrialized males are attracted to antlers as purveyors of masculinity. I would suggest that something more is going on. We are subconsciously crying for reconnection with something fundamental to our deeper selves. Modern males the world over desperately and unconsciously yearn for a return to our essential connection to nature, yet with our increasing reliance on technology and our addiction to comfort, or at least what we perceive as comfort, we consistently subvert that return. Instead we fill our lives with abstract symbols, and with violence against the natural world and each other.

I can't help but risk the cliché of the noble savage here, but this yearning, this competitiveness for symbols, this desire to prove something or to possess something, was essentially absent among my Eskimo friends twenty-five years ago. They hunted to live. They were matter-of-fact about their connection, so matter-of-fact that they could not articulate any other possibility. The fact that they lived and helped others to live was symbol enough. It's been disturbing to watch during the past quarter century these values be weakened, to observe my own dominant culture override theirs. Not just the people of Saint Lawrence Island, but Native cultures all over Alaska have begun to lose their connection. The increasing chaos and violence in Alaskan Native villages, the confusion and aimlessness of so many of the youth, is a direct reflection of the imposition of our values over their own. I would suggest that in their breakdown we see a clear reflection of our own selves.

* * * * *

One night a little over a year ago I awoke from a deep sleep to a vividly lucid image. I could see antlers growing from the head of a deer. In the quiet darkness of my bedroom I saw only the very top of the deer's head. And then, tentative at first, shiny, blood-red buttons pushing through taunt skin. There was an insistence to it, some inner code pushing against gravity. I watched slender shafts of bone expand at their tips, gain mass, and spread over a short time into an intricacy of palms and tines, delicately curved and cased in brown velvet.

There in the darkness I was struck with the significance of it, an aesthetic so predictable yet at another level so random it defies imagination -- that single moment in a male deer's yearly cycle when some hormonal pulse, stimulated by an increase in sunlight, sets into motion this unique event. What made my waking image so strong was the sense that antler-growing was nothing more or less than an integral and inseparable part of the whole spectrum of nature and life, an act of nature expanding inward and outward infinitely into the universe.

That night was one of those rare waking moments in life --I've had them a couple times -- that sets off a whole string of memories and connections. What followed was one of those late-night contests of imagination and fatigue, where sleep becomes impossible. That single antler image just kept triggering others. For several hours I engaged in the athletics of turning on the light, making a few notes, then turning the light off again and trying to sleep ... then turning the light on again when another thought crept out of the haze and demanded to be recorded ... on and off until the first light of early dawn broke the spell.

I thought of the many events in my life that antlers have been a part of. I thought also, for the first time, of the collective miracle of antlers. How

within a few weeks in early spring in North America alone, White-tail Deer in the balsam forests of northern Michigan, Mule Deer on the hard desert breaks of southern Utah, and Elk in snowy meadows along the great spine of the Rocky Mountains, all feel that first itch of antlers growing. Up and down the West Coast, in the dripping, fog-shrouded rain forests, Black Tail Deer feel it. A few weeks later, across the sub-Arctic vastness of Canada and Alaska, great black bulks of Moose feel the first pulse of what will become the most massive antlers of any. And on the harsh tundra plains of the Arctic, thousands upon thousands of Caribou feel it. Collectively, millions of creatures of one family but of different species, all respond to one signal.

That night I was struck with the magnitude of it, of the evidence of an immensely complex and grand design. What I saw, also, was how often I take that grand design for granted.

Deer are the only mammals in the world that annually grow and shed an appendage. Reptiles will shed and regrow whole skin, and some amphibians will grow missing body parts, but no warm-blooded mammal, except deer, does anything close to it. When you think about it, annually growing and shedding a major part of a body is no small feat; it clearly is a genuinely complex evolutionary response to a unique set of evolutionary circumstances.

A distinction needs to be made here: antlers are not horns. In North American wildlife, horns are found only in the family Bovidae - bison, goats, Muskox and sheep - and in Pronghorns, the only species in the family Antilocapridae. Horns are bone cores covered with horny sheaths made of agglutinated hair. They are not directly attached to the skull, as are antlers. In the case of the Pronghorn, a species that hasn't quite made up its mind to

be either Cervidae (antlered animals) or Bovidae, the horny sheath is shed each year, then replaced. Antlers are found only on deer, in North America the White Tail, Mule Deer and its subspecies the Black Tail, Wapiti (Elk), Moose, and Caribou. Antlers are pure bone that grow right out of the top of the head. Antlers are shed each year, as opposed to horns which are permanent appendages.

The development of horns and antlers in prehistoric animals took different evolutionary paths from what was most likely the same beginning. Speculation among scientists suggests that during the Miocene era, that fertile epoch of super-charged mammalian development, certain animals, in defense of their territories, used head-butting as their main mode of defense. What followed, in the scientific language, was a genetic predisposition for those genetically fortunate animals with the random potential for growth abnormalities in the skin over the skull. Or in laymen's terms : those animals that grew the biggest knobs on their heads won, and those who didn't fell by the wayside. These animals then begin to split into two camps. One went the way of horns. On others, hard skull bumps called peduncles (the forerunners of pedicles and antlers) started to appear, and here were born the early ancestors of today's deer.

Unlike Bovid horns (which are actually attached to floating buttons of bone by a supporting structure of cartilage and skin), antlers are actual bone appendages that grow from two permanent knobs, called pedicles, which are an integral part of the skull. All male deer (and female Caribou) have them.

Aside from the way they are attached and the way they grow and are shed each year, antlers are more complex than horns in another way. The velvet covering new antlers (actually skin rich with blood supplied by a complex arterial network) is highly saturated with pheromones, those

exciting aromas essential in sexual arousal. As the antlers attain full size, just prior to the rut, the velvet begins to slough off and the antlers take on a more ossified, weapon-like quality. The shedding of velvet must also be uncomfortable, because deer get quite compulsive about scrubbing it off on trees or thrashing it off in bogs and mud holes. They also take to urinating on their antlers, a gymnastic feat that is made easier the bigger the antlers. The whole process saturates the air with pheromones, getting the breeding season, for both males and females, off to a rip-roaring start.

It's all fascinating stuff. But the bottom line is that science really doesn't really have a clue why one mammal out of thousands just began to grow and shed boney protuberances each year and no other mammal bothered to. In other words, the theories of *how* antlers developed don't actually explain *why*. The best that can be said of any of it, is that it all just happened, and deer are simply what they are today because of it.

I must admit, there's something intuitively unconvincing about much of the scientific speculation. How was it that something as intricately complex as the antlers of a bull Caribou evolved out of such a utilitarian beginning as head-butting? If it's all about function, why didn't deer just develop blunt, sensible antlers, each species much the same? Why all the fancy stuff?

My waking impression of antlers growing from the head of a deer said something different: that the development of antlers had a much more designed beginning. Some deep mammalian instinct selecting for beauty first -- not form following function, but function following form, a certain aesthetic intention that permeates all of nature, that often as not selects for beauty over mere utility.

Of course, anyone with a lick of scientific training will counter that animals (humans included) adapt to a given set of environmental circumstances, and our body forms and functions evolve as a response. We adapt to survive. The presence of aesthetic appeal is simply a random occurrence.

Perhaps. At least that's the way we've been thinking about it for a lot of years now. I would suggest, though, that modern cultures, based on the god of "objective knowledge," employing the tool of reductionist science, looks at everything with "practical," mechanistic eyes. From our utilitarian perceptions everything has to have a utilitarian purpose. Form must follow function.

I say the opposite, well aware that generations of philosophers since the early Greeks have grappled with the mystery of beauty. I'm not about to suggest that I'm going to one-up any of the great thinkers. All I'm saying is that beauty is a universal quality; we may not be able to define it but we know it when we see it. In antlers beauty comes first, before utility. Antlers are more than sexual attractants or defense tools. They are beauty for beauty's sake, visual symbols that reflect a vital mystery that all of us, even the most hardened of us, are drawn to.

Of any of the deer, for sheer size and bulk, Moose are the heavyweights of the planet. The largest are the Alaska-Yukon subspecies, with mature bulls standing seven feet at the shoulder and weighing in excess of a thousand pounds. They have the antlers to match. On a typical five or six year-old bull the antlers themselves can easily weigh more than the smallest of the North American Cervidae, the Key Deer (a miniature race of Whitetail found in southern Florida). The world record spread is close to seven feet.

I've killed several Moose. I vaguely recall the details of all of them. One, though, stands out.

I would guess I'd been in Alaska ten years. It was early October. My friend Jerry Kocer and I flew in his small Super Cub over the Tanana River flats south of Fairbanks. We were meat hunting, flying and looking for Moose to kill for our winter fare. (It was still legal then to fly, spot Moose from the air, land and shoot. Today, regulations require hunters to spend one night on the ground before they shoot. "Fair chase," it's called.)

After a half-hour in the air we spotted three mature bulls standing out in the middle of a large swampy opening. They stood black and huge against the rust reds and yellows of autumn. Their antlers, blood-stained, recently rubbed free of velvet, shone faintly pink in the late afternoon sun.

Jerry bounced the Cub in on a gravel bar. We crawled out, loaded our rifles, then cut through the fringe of alders at the edge of the river. On the ground, things take on an entirely different scale than when you're airborne. What looks like a breeze of a walk from the air can turn into a trail of frustration on the ground, particularly in the humpy and wet torture of Alaska muskeg.

We knew roughly where the bulls were, but decided we needed to pinpoint their location exactly. So when we came upon a small hump of dry land with a grove of birch, Jerry suggested I climb a tree for a better look. I handed him my rifle and angled across the grove, looking for the best possibility. Eyes upward, paying little attention to the ground, I suddenly stumbled and fell face forward into a hole. As I untangled and hoisted myself out I looked up. Several yards off, staring sourly at me, was one of the largest black bears I've ever seen in the interior of Alaska. I'd fallen into his freshly dug den.

I kept my eyes on him. "Easy," I said. Then I called as calmly as I could to Jerry, "Heh, we got a bear here."

Jerry came up quickly, his rifle ready. The bear just stood there, unafraid, clearly considering us intruders in his business. "Should I shoot him?" Jerry asked. His reaction was not one of fear, but one of the meat hunter. Berry-fattened black bear is some of the best eating going.

"No", I said, "let's not take a chance on scaring those bulls."

The bear stood there a few moments longer. Then he swung his head in disgust, turned and casually ambled off. Just before he disappeared into the willows he stopped, looked back over his shoulder and fired us one last irritated glance.

I shinnied up a tree and spotted the bulls a short ways off, looking as unconcerned and docile as cows in a pasture. The wind, what there was of it, was in our favor. So we cut directly toward them, and within a few minutes caught sight of them through a screen of willows, less than fifty yards off. It was my turn to shoot. I crept forward a few paces, stopped and instinctively put the cross hairs on the shoulder of the bull with the largest antlers. Meat hunting or not, my instinct was to kill the bull with the biggest antlers; it only made sense to me. I squeezed and his legs buckled beneath him. He fell as if he'd been driven into the ground.

The other two bulls ran off. Jerry and I approached with our rifles ready in case the one down was still living. But there was no life there. We stood over its immense and once-powerful bulk. Blood oozed from the hole where the bullet had entered and spread through the thick hair. The bull's head was twisted up and toward us, eyes staring blankly, its heavy antlers spreading well over five feet. They were not record antlers, but big enough that once I would have been elated by them.

This was not my first bull Moose. It was the one, though, that brought to the surface something that had been pushing at me for a long time. I turned away from Jerry, still fully taken by the notion that grown men don't cry. But I remember this: I wanted to.

I know that moment has no simple explanation. My emotions had to do with more than killing that bull. They had to do with the perfection of the day, with the encounter with the bear, with the way the sun touched and intensified the fall colors. But that wasn't all of it. Living in Alaska, depending upon fish and game for winter fare, I'd become more a meat hunter than a trophy hunter. In fact, true to the image of a "real Alaskan," I'd become disgusted by those who killed for antlers only.

I'd killed a lot over the years, wild animals and, as a professional dog musher, sled dogs that were not championship quality. My feelings that day had to do with the collective of killing that I'd done over the years, with a budding awareness that blood was staining me in uncertain ways. The seemingly impenetrable sadness that I felt with the killing of that bull was the signal of something else stirring in me, a hint that some other part of me was demanding to be heard.

It was several years after that that I decided to quit hunting altogether. Why did I quit? I don't know all of it, other than the sorrow of it had begun to outweigh the pleasure. And there was also a growing sense that my killing was in some way part of the whole human attack on the natural world. It's not that I hadn't read plenty, and that I couldn't espouse, myself, about the nobility of taking lives. My training as a wildlife biologist had also grounded me fully in all the "managed harvest" justifications of modern hunting. None of this was enough, though. Instead I began to see all of it as

rationalizations to keep doing what we've doing for a long time, because to change the way we behave on this planet would require so much.

I believe we seek to possess antlers (or any number of other things) because they symbolize and contain something we have misplaced under layer after layer of industrial "progress" and rational thought. The possession of object symbols, like antlers, was also part of so-called primitive peoples' lives, but those objects were possessed with a ceremonial intention, with an open recognition of their beauty and what that beauty symbolized. Witness the everyday tools of primary peoples -- they were works of art and always endowed with pictures or forms of the natural world. Primary peoples' ceremonies (which modern cultures are essentially devoid of) were (and still are) always dedicated in some way to a recognition of the great mystery, and were most usually endowed with acts and symbols of beauty.

Pre-industrial people were completely immersed in the natural world, and their immersion was so essential that there was no novelty to it. The Eskimo men on my trail crew, although battered by the realities of modern Western culture, still operated from that world view. Thus, the antlers of the Caribou I shot were in one way taken for granted. Of course they were beautiful, but no more so than all of nature. No need to possess them unless they could serve some utilitarian or ceremonial purpose.

We modern men, on the other hand, are left with feeble and quickly disappearing symbols of our connection. Our sources are most always indirect and abstract, like the names of our automobiles - Cougar, Mustang, Jaguar. Or our sports teams and men's social clubs - Bears, Eagles, Falcons, Elks, Moose, Lions. Or how some of us, desperate for essential connection, go to great lengths and expense to hunt and kill wild things and hang their skins and horns and antlered heads on our walls in a futile attempt to reconnect with

something misplaced, some vital and direct relationship with the natural world that has been buried under layer after layer of scientific, technological, and industrial conditioning. Modern men have become simple caricatures of other selves we desperately desire to rediscover.

I will readily admit this for myself. Luckily, though, the act of killing was part of a process for me, a step toward relating to something larger than myself. I know now that, contrary to what sport hunters say about “closing the circle,” the act of killing was not the essential part of it. I know now that one can get the same connection by sitting in silence and sinking into nature, by consciously feeling. For sure it may take longer; it requires a willingness to let it come, not to demand it, not to control, not to covet some symbol or proof of the outcome. Not even to care if there is an outcome.

I may hunt again; it could become a necessity. Who knows? For now, though, I have no desire to.

My decision to quit hunting was not an entirely logical one. It had more to do with coming to feel in a new way. It had also to do with a new recognition of beauty, with beginning to see in a new way. The beauty in the curve and grain of a Caribou antler, in all wild things, in the grace of their yearly cycles, is an infinitesimal fraction of a grand design and at the same time all of it. It cannot be understood entirely or defined adequately. Only its essence can be seen via the aesthetic of nature.

I have come to understand that hunting for me was about connection. But for me, the beauty of it, the desire to touch some mystery was lost once the killing was definite. I have had to look honestly at that element in my own psyche, and in the industrial male psyche in general, that leads us to destroy what we most yearn to touch and understand. There's so much irony in it, this

yearning to return to our natures, and the ways we consistently subvert that return.

Recently a friend reminded me of an idea my Eskimo friends introduced to me many years earlier: that animals give their lives to the hunter. "It's the reverse," she said, referring to my activist work to save the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from petroleum development, "you've decided to give your life to the animals, to that place." I suppose there's some truth in what she said, though I must admit the idea embarrasses me a bit. No longer a hunter, I still return to the Arctic as often as I can. It's true I no longer kill, that I've committed myself to environmental activism, that I'm in love with the Arctic.

I have a large photo over my desk that means a lot to me. It was taken in the Brooks Range of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge a few years ago, when my friend Tom Ballantyne and I were on a month-long packing and float trip there. In the foreground of the photo the tundra is a blur of flowers, pink Moss Campion, purple Lupine, yellow Saxifrage. In the midground a group of bull Caribou climbs a gentle slope, left to right. Behind them a rocky bench angles up to the base of a gray mountain strung with wisps of white fog.

Tom and I had come to the place in the photo following a compass bearing through fog so thick we could see nothing but each other and the ground a few paces in front of our feet. We had climbed a low pass, but once we gained the top we could not figure the way across; the terrain beyond appeared to fall away too steeply to trust an descent in the fog. We talked it over and decided our only choice was to camp and wait for the weather to clear. The only flat and relatively dry piece of ground was a small gravel

island in the middle of a shallow, braided stream. We pitched our tent, crawled into our sleeping bags and went to sleep.

Some hours later the evening sun shone on our tent, making it too hot to sleep. I pulled open the flap for a look outside. We were camped in a small mountain bowl. Gray talus peaks, hung with remnant snow fields, reared steeply around us. Spread across the bowl, several hundred bull Caribou, their antlers graced in soft brown velvet, grazed in the late evening light. They kept a respectable distance from our camp, close enough, though, that we could hear their restless grunts and the clicks of the sesamoid bones in their feet.

I took Tom's camera and climbed to the top of a knoll above camp. I lay down on my stomach and began to photograph the Caribou moving across the landscape. Then I put the camera down and just watched. As I did, I felt a surge of joy, an unmistakable sense that I was exactly where I was supposed to be at that moment in the universe.

I lay there a long time, letting the feelings of gratefulness wash over me. And then I caught myself. Without thinking I had raised my arms into the shooting position. I was sighting down the barrel of an imaginary rifle, holding close on the shoulder of a bull with immense antlers. When I realized what I was doing, I laughed and dropped my arms, surprised and a little embarrassed by my instinct. The Caribou heard me laugh. They turned, heads up and toward me, alert. I focused on the big bull again. His antlers spread wide and high. The brow palms were long, reaching almost to his nose. The main tines reached like fingers toward the heavens. He snorted. The herd turned then and trotted quickly away from me, heads reared back, tails high, moving with that comical grace peculiar to Caribou. I laughed again. And then I cried tears of joy, amazed and grateful to be so alive.

Facing East

It was during those few suffering hot days in July, when mosquitoes take to the air in dark clouds so thick and insistent that they drive living things insane, that the Caribou came. They appeared suddenly, first a line of brown velvet antlers moving far off through the heat waves, like some daunting apparition. Then they took form, maybe ten or maybe a thousand, moving quickly, determined, driven to the edge of panic by the bugs.

If I was on the ball, not lost in some far off fantasy, I snapped to attention, grabbed my binoculars and the four-finger hand counter, and began clicking numbers. Index finger, bulls. Middle finger, dry cows. Third finger, cows with calves. Little finger, yearlings and sex undetermined. They always came too fast. Stay calm, I'd tell myself, the sure way to blow a count is to panic. Also keep in mind vehicles on the road. Vehicles always make the difference.

The Caribou were heading for the cooler, windier, mosquito-free shores of the Arctic Ocean that lay just a few miles to the north. This response to insects is a migration pattern that has gone on for as long as there have been Caribou in the Arctic. But times have changed. Now their migration in certain places is hindered by a maze of pipelines and roads.

I would watch them cross the outer fringes of my study area, note the time, and check for vehicles on the road. Too often, then, the same maddening scenario would develop. The Caribou closed in on the pipeline. A couple hundred feet away the lead animal, usually a roman-nosed old cow, would throw up her head and stop. The others would immediately stop behind her,

begin milling, shaking heads, twitching hides and tails, battling the mosquitoes.

The lead cow would advance cautiously toward the pipe, nose held high in the air, like a bird dog on fresh scent. She would stop again, clearly mystified by this odd form looming over the tundra. And then a pick-up truck or a belly dump or some other piece of heavy equipment would approach noisily on the road. The old cow would turn, begin paralleling the pipe, the others following her closely. The vehicle would blast by in a cloud of dust, more often than not with its horn blaring. The herd would turn as one, running wide-eyed, nostrils flared, stampeding back toward the horizon from which they had first appeared minutes earlier.

What I remember most is the anger, the frustration I felt, when I watched the Caribou fail at crossing. Each day the anger built and seemed to have no place to go. So many times I stood tense and hopeful, then watched the same scenario unfold, felt their defeat as the animals turned away. And with it I felt a much larger defeat, the lunacy of this clumsy, arrogant game we moderns play with the natural world.

I like Caribou. Ironically, I have ever since I killed my first ones years ago in Alaska. Not that I hunt anymore. No, years of blood-letting and watching the planet I love deteriorate in every way, have brought me to a place where most modern justifications for hunting ring false. What I'm left with is a fascination for an amazing animal. Caribou live and thrive by the thousands in one of the harshest environments imaginable. Winters are beyond mean, with twenty-four hour a day darkness, punishing winds, and temperatures diving down to fifty, sixty, seventy below zero, not counting wind chill. Summers offer no relief. Mid June to the end of July,

temperatures can range up into the eighties, but the summer months are dominated by parasitic insects. Mosquitoes are just the beginning. Next come the bot flies, stout, hairy buggers that inject live larvae up a Caribou's nose. Bot fly larvae then migrate through the nasal passages and into the back of the throat, where they grow to eventually be hacked out by their host. If the bots aren't bad enough, then there are warble flies that lay eggs on the Caribous' legs. The warble fly hatchlings burrow through the skin and migrate upward subcutaneously to the back. There they bore breathing holes through the skin, and grow to the size of BB's. In the spring the larvae emerge painfully (for the Caribou) through the skin, eventually to pupate on the ground. During fly season, Caribou stand spraddle legged, heads down, listening for a fly's approach. When one comes, a single fly, whole herds will run off wildly across the tundra. Add to all this misery the large predators -- Gray Wolves, Grizzly Bears, Wolverines, humans -- and there are not two weeks a year that Caribou live any kind of easy, comfortable existence. Yet given a chance they can thrive in the Arctic.

I like Caribou, also, because of their restlessness; Caribou are travelers by nature. I can relate. I'm a traveler. It seems right to me somehow that my own restless journeys were at one time financed by observing some of the most compulsive wanderers on the planet. The Caribou studies I participated in were funded by major oil companies, which they are mandated by law each year to spend a certain amount on environmental impact analysis. I took their money; oil development paid for my journeys. Paradoxically, oil money also helped me begin to see in a new way.

My wooden observation tower sat lonely out on the tundra, at the southern edge of the oil fields. I entered it via a wooden ladder propped

beneath, then popped up inside like a gopher through a trap-door set in the middle of the floor. The view south through the Plexiglas windows was of tundra spreading endlessly in all directions, a dull green, polygonally patterned plain (a physical feature of permafrost tundra), pocked with countless small, black lakes. On the perimeters of the lakes, waterfowl still nested -- Black Brant, Tundra Swans, and Pintail Ducks -- migratory species themselves. On the drier ground, amid stunted willows, Golden and Black-bellied Plovers, and Lapland Longspurs hid nests from the relentless predation of jaegers. Occasionally, an Arctic Fox wandered by, or a Snowy Owl floated past like a winged ghost. On still days, I could hear the plaintive cry of a Yellow-Billed Loon above the sounds on the road. Far out across the tundra it called, signaling like a prophet.

North, east, west of my tower was a modern wasteland. The north slope oil development, "The Slope" as it's called by locals, is the largest contiguous industrial development on earth, several hundred square miles, a maze of roads and pipes and production facilities. Let the oil companies say what they will about how carefully they've developed the Arctic. The bottom line is petroleum production is a toxic, destructive, go-for-broke business, dedicated to one thing only: excessive profits, billions and billions of dollars taken at the expense of the earth.

Alaska's North Slope tells the whole tale of it. Toxic waste bubbles in settling ponds and seeps into nearby lakes. Huge holes dot the earth, where billions of yards of gravel has been mined. Every turn of the horizon is broken by the works of man: drilling platforms, radio towers, transmission lines, pipelines, camp buildings, oil wells, refinery stacks. There's something surreal about it, a space odyssey quality that confuses the mind, something oddly beautiful yet at the same time repulsively ugly. Being an observer of

wildlife there, of observing living things juxtaposed against everything that seems their antithesis, is a schizoid experience.

My part in the Caribou studies was not glamorous, just interminable hours and days of waiting, and scanning an often empty tundra plain with my binoculars. There were only my idle thoughts to keep me company, thoughts of women met along the way, journeys taken, and others still to be taken. These were long, wistful journal entries that tried to make sense of such a vagabond life. And above all the chatter in my mind, the noise of the wind, the ceaseless wind, blowing, rattling, careening off the tundra, shaking the tower so hard at times I thought it might tear the guy wires out of the frozen earth and I might lift off and sail away over the frozen ocean like some reluctant space traveler.

But then one day the wind dies, and the Arctic yields to the round the clock sun. The world becomes a flat yellow glare, an angry, buzzing mop of mosquitoes and flies, a guarantee that Caribou will soon appear somewhere on the coastal plain. Then the idea is to count their numbers, map their movements, and note their reactions to the elevated pipeline and the road adjacent to it. "Success rates crossing pipelines" was the scientific jargon, as if Caribou were competing for something.

Over the course of the three summer seasons that I participated in the studies, my colleagues and I noted these things: Gravel ramps, built over lowered sections of the pipelines as crossing devices, fail miserably. When confronted with any obstacle foreign to several thousand years of Arctic experience, Caribou in numbers usually become confused and retreat. Given enough time, though, some will eventually figure it out and begin to cross under the pipelines (usually four to six feet off the ground,) or over the

ramps and the roads adjacent to the pipelines. The bulls will duck their heads in an exaggerated way, careful of their massive antlers, and then quickly shuttle under. But trucks and machinery on the roads - -"vehicle interactions" we called them - - will almost always foil any attempt. Bulls and dry cows clearly get through the oil fields more easily than cows with calves; cows with calves rarely succeed, even with no traffic on the roads. A few bulls do adapt to the oil fields, in fact seem to prefer them, most likely because of the lack of predators.

My colleagues and I did not note (or more accurately, *record*) the confusion, the white-eyed panic, the separation of cows from calves when pipelines and roads with traffic were encountered. We did not record the casual attitudes of the workers in the oil fields, their disinterest or even outright disdain for living things. We did not record the Caribous' beauty, their comic grace, the miracles of minute ecological adaptations that allow them to thrive in a punishing environment. Nor did we record the frustration we felt, the anger.

All we recorded was what we were allowed to within the parameters of the study. We generated "data" to be run through the mathematical hieroglyphics of computer models, data that was then spit out as statistics, graphs, charts, and technological language devoid of any smells, colors or feelings, all to be thickly bound in a report to gather dust on desks in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Houston. Somewhere early on in the process, at the tip of my own pencil, Caribou quit being living things, with all the miraculous interactions of any species, and became an abstract idea.

I recall the frustration of being bound by those parameters. I wanted other people to feel what I felt, to observe what I observed. I wanted them to know what it was like to see the Arctic change so rapidly, to have seen this

same tundra world before development, to have seen it wild and unscarred, and then a few short years later to see the heart torn from it. When I expressed my concern to one of my colleagues I was reminded that scientists pride themselves on being detached, on being objective. "You can't care about these animals and do the work," he said. He was the same one who called Caribou "tundra maggots" referring, I guess, to their numbers and the way a large herd on the move seems to squirm in the distance.

Too many research biologists in the oil fields go numb, resistant to feeling. The reductionist nature of the "science" we practiced, the crush of bureaucratic and corporate demands, seeing over and over again the destruction of wild places and of living things, all these things divorced us from our feelings. I know, though, beneath it all most of us cared. Almost all the field biologists I've known are people who began their careers with a keen appreciation of the wild and of wild things. I can honestly say the consulting company I worked for was as reputable as they get, committed to good science, at least good science as it's practiced by extractive industry. I know, too, that most of us working there were uncomfortable at some level with what we were doing. But our reasoning was, if we don't do this study, some other, less ethical consulting company will. At least we'll do it the best that it can be done. And beneath that reasoning was one ever insistent practicality: we all needed to make a living.

Yes, so much suspect work is justified by the dual rationalizations of inevitability and economics. But in my mind it's not so simple. All of us working there gave away something important in ourselves when we sold ourselves to the oil corporations. It's hard to say this, hard to make judgments about people I care about, but there's a heavy price to it. Something died in

all of us, some deep part, some vital idealism and passion that feeds the soul and gives us cause for full living.

Too much of wildlife biology has become an exercise dominated by technicians, computer model addicts, people who have bought the notion that scientific practice is supposed to be completely value-free. The old time naturalist/biologist is for the most part missing today (or ignored), those men or women who dedicated their whole lives to understanding intimately a place and the interrelationships of living things in that place. The patience of that kind of observation is missing. Everything is speeded up today, computerized, depersonalized, abstracted. Too much biology has become the questionable science of risk assessment, an exercise dedicated to answer only this question: how far can we push a species with our industrial activities before it will fail entirely?

On the North Slope we took the science of abstraction and risk assessment to a new level; we studied Caribou knowing full well that nothing would change in the oil fields if our study suggested harm to Caribou populations. Our only intent with the study was to document what was already underway, to blanket with statistical jargon what anyone with a lick of common sense could see was a growing disaster for wildlife and for what was once a wild place. It was already well documented that cows had ceased calving in a major portion of their traditional calving areas because of human activities. This displacement was concentrating the cows into smaller areas, thus depleting nutrition sorely needed for calving. Speculation was that calves were being born weaker, making them more susceptible to mosquitoes and other stresses. It didn't take a science degree to figure out that cutting off access to mosquito relief habitat added another complication to an already highly complicated existence. The effects could not be easily proven

with a tidy study, but all that was need to see it was just a dollop of common sense. All it took was a willingness to look, an openness to feeling.

One of the oil companies operating on the North Slope used to run an ad in national magazines with a glossy colored photo of massively antlered bull Caribou grazing contentedly by an oil rig. The text went something like this: "Working to protect our environment while providing for America's future." This catchy slogan used to turn me livid. I knew the truth. I wondered, why don't scientists speak up, go public, tell people what's really going on up in the Arctic?

By my third season in the oil fields I was beginning to realize I was in the wrong place, working in the wrong business. Each day I sat in my tower and fantasized about walking east. I saw myself walking quickly, leaving the oil fields behind. I walked effortlessly through the jumble of rivers and lakes, fifty miles east, until I came to the broad, braided delta of the Canning River. Beyond the Canning was country completely devoid of any oil structures, country untouched and primal, wild enough to yield what my overly civilized soul yearned to feel again. Beyond the Canning is an area the size of the state of Maine that government bodies have designated the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the last truly wild places on the planet. Within the boundaries of the Refuge, the Brooks Range, the wildest mountain range in North America, curves north and comes within miles of the Arctic Ocean. This makes for a unique ecosystem where mountains, coastal plain, and ocean combine to create an abundance of wildlife habitat. The Arctic Refuge is roadless, trailless, free of public facilities, virtually free of any evidence of modern man. A hundred and fifty thousand Caribou migrate annually across the Refuge in the same unhindered patterns they have for

thousands of years. Wolves still roam hungry-eyed. Grizzlies and Wolverines prowl the hillsides in search of food. In the fall, snow geese by the thousands stage out on the coastal plain for their flight south. It's an easy place to love. I have since my first visit there, twenty-seven years ago.

But why get all misty eyed over some "empty wasteland" as one politician from Alaska called the Refuge? I'd suggest that loving a place is a big part of what life's about. One of those frustrating paradoxes of our modern humanness is that we seem to deny, fear and resist, even destroy, what we most yearn to experience. One of the ways we avoid feeling for a place is by staying on the move. We Americans (and I include myself) are perhaps the most restless people on earth. We migrate, not like nomads following seasons and food, but because we are unhappy, because we seek something outside ourselves, something that can never be found. We resist learning to love a place, a landscape, resist risking that much intimacy with something so powerful, because doing so might mean we have to stay and take a stand. Government policies support such transience and detachment. The managers of National Parks, Refuges, Forests, are routinely transferred every few years, to keep them from caring about a place too much. Loving a place, in the industrial/political mind-set, is a sign of weakness, a tragic flaw. Caring about Caribou is sheer nonsense, gushing sentimentality.

Once, a few years back, while visiting Washington D.C., I had lunch with a veteran environmental lobbyist. He was a pleasant guy, balding and spreading soft in the middle. In the course of our conversation he admitted he didn't feel too comfortable being too far away from civilization. "I like my amenities," he said. "I'm more a theorist than I am a naturalist. I just know it makes good sense to protect the planet, so I've made a career of it."

"How do you get up for it each day," I asked him, "without feeling some passion for the wild?"

He looked me straight in the eye. "When you lobby these politicians, passion's got nothing to do with it. You come here and these guys see you care too much, they'll discount whatever it is you have to say. My advice, keep feelings out of it."

I let it go at that, even though I wanted to pontificate a bit and suggest that buying into the other guys' game only adds to the problem. But I couldn't judge his motives; he was involved, doing what worked best for him. If I understood his reasoning, though, the idea is to approach everything as pragmatically as possible. Leave out the feelings, because feelings don't pay the bills.

I get stumped here. How do I say what I want to say, tie the notion of caring for a place into the way some people think? How can I not sound like some emotionally overwrought tree hugger? It's the challenge of trying to describe something outside too many people's experience. It's kind of like trying to describe the experience of eating ice cream to primitive tribesmen from New Guinea, when their experience holds no references for the feelings of cold and melting, or the taste of cream and sugar.

But how long can we keep fooling ourselves? Our migrations are fueled, literally, with oil. The ultimate irony is that in the quest for and conquest of oil, we willingly destroy thousands of years of migratory evolution, all to keep ourselves moving at this desperate pace for just a few more years. A case in point is the mean estimate of the amount of oil that might be found in the Arctic Refuge. If it were our only source, it would last the United States six months. What price are we willing to pay to keep the

illusion of our progress alive, to avoid *feeling* the truth of our tenuous existence?

Autumn comes to the Arctic in a rush. One day the tundra is green and the next it's a palette of colors: reds and rusts and muted yellows. Newly feathered waterfowl begin to test their wings, restless, pushed by an inner whispering that warns of the hard hand of winter that will soon hold this place.

In my tower I could hear the same whispering. My third field season was drawing to a close; one journey was ending and another uncertain one was about to begin. As it always is for me, I had to ask myself what I had learned, what is it I'm supposed to carry from this place?

It was well past midnight, yet the sun was still alive, a tepid orange orb set low on the northern horizon. It cast a diffused, yellow light over the tundra, a gentler touch than the pale, angled glare of daytime.

I borrowed a pick-up and drove over gravel roads through a maze of silver pipelines, the capillaries, veins, arteries of the giant. I passed dozens of well pads with rows of metal sheathed pump houses standing like space age knights in revue, and refineries with gas flares pulsing red into the night sky, and portable drilling rigs, set on newly laid gravel pads far out on the tundra, towering ten stories high, aliens in a world where the tallest plant might make a foot. I passed equipment yards with rows of Cats and graders and belly dumps, and construction camps, with lines of portable housing units connected in close rectangular patterns, and the ordered sprawl of a main operation camp, this one famed for an Olympic sized swimming pool, full gym, and a tropical garden inside.

I drove northeast until I came to the edge of it all, to the place where I could finally look eastward and beyond see nothing man-made. I was close to the Arctic Ocean, where a gravel causeway juts north a couple miles out into the water, a man-made structure reaching out like a long finger to touch an artificial island that hosts another major production facility. Closer, on a natural island just off shore, is one of the few nesting colonies of Snow Geese on Alaska's north coast. Shortly after the goslings hatch, the adult geese swim ashore with them and walk inland to feed on vegetation lush than the island provides. The adult geese are extremely wary, protective, noticeably sensitive to any intrusion. The biologists observing them noted that, for the most part, the geese's migration was thwarted by traffic on the new road leading out on the causeway.

I parked at the road's edge, shouldered a small pack and began walking quickly east. I waded shallow braids of the Sagavanirktok River, then gained the narrow beach of the deceptively placid Arctic Ocean. The beach I walked along is a slatey gray interface between the tundra world and an ocean world that for most of the year is ice bound, covered beyond imagination with a solid white armor. Summer, though, the winds shift from the northwest to the southeast, pushing the sun-weakened pack ice off shore, so that it lies far out to the north, visually just a shimmering mirage, a refracted white band of light against the darker curve of the sky. On a windless day (a rare occurrence in the Arctic) or when the wind is out of the south, there are no waves on this ocean, only a gentle lapping against the beach.

I walked for an hour or so, zig-zagging from the beach out onto the tundra, and back to the beach again. I spotted an Arctic Fox busily investigating a colony of Arctic Ground Squirrels, and a Snowy Owl perched motionless on its hunting mound, and out over the ocean, the white-on-black

flash of King Eiders in flight. I walked until I came to the banks of a black tundra creek, too wide and deep at its mouth to cross. I had left the oil fields, but I had not left their influence. The beach I walked along was littered with chunks of Styrofoam and soda cans, survey stakes topped with tags of fluorescent red ribbon, frayed lengths of rope, and the ever present symbol of modern man in the north - rusted, 55 gallon drums. The oil fields were (and still are) expanding each year, east and west, and out into the sea. Arctic Char, fish the local Inuits have depended upon for centuries, had mysteriously failed to show in numbers that year in the rivers east of the causeway. Speculation by some biologists was that the causeway had short-circuited ocean currents, confusing the fish's navigational patterns. Some Inuits were saying that the same was happening to the Bowhead Whale.

I turned south and stared out over the tundra, the coastal plain that some call barren. In the distance, eighty miles at least, the peaks of the Brooks Range caught the early morning light. Somewhere in those mountains, a new road crossed a high pass, connecting the oil fields with the rest of the world. Its construction speeded up time on the coastal plain, brought it square into the twentieth century. And beyond the Brooks Range, far to the south, millions of North Americans demand more of everything, more goods, more oil, and ironically, more wild places to escape to.

I stood still and I let the sounds of the tundra take over. Close by I heard the whistled *chu-leet* of a Golden Plover, and somewhere in the distance, the cry of an Arctic Loon. I heard the wind gather itself. I watched it touch the tundra, bend stands of Cotton Grass, riffle the surface of ponds.

I faced east again. I thought of my fantasy of walking to the Arctic Refuge. I knew that the oil companies, speculating there are paying quantities of petroleum in the Refuge, were spending millions on a public

relations effort to get permission from the federal government to develop there. It struck me then that I stood at a place symbolically focusing all the dilemmas of modern man. To the west, the oil fields, the ultimate symbol of what we've been up to for over three centuries now: the notion of frontier, of resources unlimited, of the unquestioned righteousness and possibilities of industrial technology. And to the east, a remnant of unaltered nature, the priceless remains of a former world, the path back to something our overly de-natured souls most certainly yearn for, even those taken by the mind-set of development. Like it or not, it may indeed be an either/or choice, a win/lose decision. And at that moment the same might have been said for me. The place I stood represented an interface between two possibilities for my own life.

The sun was climbing the east flank of its orbit, casting a new, harsher quality of light across the tundra. A life comes to a barrier and a new direction is taken. As I stood there I saw my part in the scarring of Alaska, not an active part particularly, more one of a compliance by silence. I began to see the denial that feeds the myths of progress, and with it my own denial. It angered me when I thought of oil development in the Arctic Refuge. But what was I doing about it? How was my participation in the oil fields, my assumptions and consumptions, any different or more righteous than the executive who signed my pay check? If I wanted the guarantee of wild in my own life, and wild places for the generations who came after me, what was I doing about it?

I made a decision then: this would be my last season in the oil fields. I would begin to follow another voice, whatever it asked, wherever it took me.

I stood there a while longer, facing east, feeling the edges of a new freedom, a release from some long held confinement. Then I turned and

began walking to the pickup, west, back to the oil fields. A Parasitic Jaeger flashed up from the tundra, flew swiftly away from me, then swooped downward out of sight. Ahead, far off over the Arctic plain, a giant plume of black smoke, a flare-off in the fields, trailed northward across the sky.

(Note: My decision to quit the oil fields and follow another voice led to the production of THE LAST GREAT WILDERNESS, a multi-media slide show about The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the reality of petroleum development in the Arctic. I traveled with the show for three years, all over the country, did hundreds of shows for thousands of people. Through the efforts of many dedicated people, throughout America, The Arctic Refuge was temporarily saved from petroleum development. Today, though, with the new Republican Congress, and the most key committee chairs filled by rabidly pro-development politicians from Alaska, The Arctic Refuge is now threatened more than ever. Language in the Republican sponsored budget bill projects revenues from leasing the coastal plain of The Arctic Refuge. The decision to protect or develop American's last great wilderness will most likely be made this fall on the President's desk. It's up to Americans everywhere to let the President know they want The Arctic Refuge protected.)